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**Feigning Commonwealths?: Ben Jonson and Republicanism**

**Two volumes**

**Volume I**

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**Submitted for the degree of PhD in Renaissance Studies  
at the University of Warwick**

**Centre for the Study of the Renaissance**

**September 1994**

**FEIGNING COMMONWEALTHS?:  
BEN JONSON AND REPUBLICANISM**

## SUMMARY

This thesis examines the various operations of notions of republicanism in the Jonsonian canon, in particular within his dramatic compositions. Taking “republicanism” as a term to refer to groups of often contrasting and conflicting ideologies, it examines the direct influence of Renaissance Humanism’s interest in republican history and constitutions upon Ben Jonson’s work, looking at the role of Ancient Rome (in its incarnation both as Empire and Republic) and early modern Venice and Florence in a number of his plays. It also considers the influence of republicanism as a linguistic programme, deriving often from a number of European conflicts against the dominant authorities, and disseminated through the potentially democratizing print culture that was emerging in the early seventeenth century.

Republicanism is seen to shade into notions of community and the communal, and also to disperse and displace comfortable concepts of the same. This is seen to carry a special valency in Jonson’s later plays, although it is an issue that also figures in the texts that precede them. In placing a particular focus on Jonson’s less-discussed drama, the thesis seeks to reassess his canon, avoiding any simplistic developmental reading of his career and, in subverting a strictly chronological approach, reclaiming individual texts for more precise and contextualized understandings - on a political, sociological, and gendered level. The interest in the local in Jonsonian drama requests a similarly localized reading of the play-texts.

By concentrating upon Jonson’s plays, the thesis also uncovers a registration within them of the inherent republicanism of the dramatic genre. Jonson recognizes this in his continued interest in the role of audiences in the production of meanings. He examines both the operations and the breakdowns of contractual agreements in society at large and in the theatrical situation, confirming that the authority of the author or monarch can never be absolute.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The theatre is like a small republic, it requires private sacrifices for the good of the whole.

(TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER, *Our Country's Good*)

As ever there is a list of those without whom . . . I would like to thank the following for their contribution to the whole which I acknowledge mine:

Jonathan Bate, Richard Burt, Humfrey Butters, Juliet Dusingberre, Richard Dutton, Stephen Greenblatt, Thomas Healy, John Higham, Peter Holland, Susan James, Peter Mack, Jeremy Maule, J.R. Mulryne, Timothy Murray, David Norbrook, Christopher Pye, Carol Rutter, Kay Sanders, Michael Sanders, Quentin Skinner, Blair Worden.

Special thanks to my supervisor, Rowland Cotterill.

This is dedicated to John, if he wants it.

## NOTES ON PROCEDURE

The only complete edition of Ben Jonson's works remains that edited for Oxford University Press by C.H. Herford, and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (11 volumes, 1925-1952), henceforth *H & S*. This is in old spelling, which itself poses problems of accessibility for students of Jonson, and its editorial decisions have steadily come under scrutiny by Jonsonian scholars of recent decades - in particular with regard to the dating of certain texts.

A modern spelling edition of *H & S* was produced by G.A. Wilkes for Oxford University Press in 1981 but the editorial commentary is insubstantial and the edition is not always easily available.

I have therefore elected to follow a somewhat eclectic path in my use of editions in this thesis, employing modern individual editions where at all possible and resorting to *H & S* where not. I have always notified the procedure within each chapter.

In 1989 Cambridge University Press produced a two volume *Selected Plays of Ben Jonson* edited by Martin Butler and Johanna Proctor. I have employed these volumes (henceforth *Selected Plays*) except in those cases where a modern Revels edition (Manchester University Press) exists.

The editions used are as follows (I have placed details of each edition in the footnotes on the initial occasion used) :

<i>The Case is Altered</i>	<i>H &amp; S</i> III
<i>Every Man In His Humour</i> (Quarto)	<i>H &amp; S</i> III
<i>Every Man Out of His Humour</i>	<i>H &amp; S</i> III
<i>Cynthia's Revels; or, The Fountain of Self-Love</i>	<i>H &amp; S</i> IV
<i>Poetaster</i>	<i>H &amp; S</i> IV
<i>Sejanus, his Fall</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> I
<i>Eastward Ho</i>	ed. by R.W. Van Fossen (Revels, 1979)
<i>Volpone</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> I
<i>Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> I
<i>The Alchemist</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> II
<i>Catiline, his Conspiracy</i>	ed. by Jane Bolton and W.F. Gardner (London: Edward Arnold, 1973)
<i>Bartholomew Fair</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> II
<i>The Devil is an Ass</i>	ed. by Peter Happé (Revels, 1994)
<i>Every Man In His Humour</i> (Folio)	ed. by Martin Seymour-Smith (London: A & C Black (New Mermaids), 1966; repr. 1988)
<i>The Staple of News</i>	ed. by Anthony Parr (Revels, 1988)
<i>The New Inn</i>	ed. by Michael Hattaway (Revels, 1984)
<i>The Magnetic Lady; or The Humours Reconciled</i>	<i>H &amp; S</i> VI
<i>A Tale of a Tub</i>	<i>Selected Plays</i> II

*The Sad Shepherd; or, A Tale of Robin-hood*

*H & SVII*

*Poems*

*The Oxford Ben Jonson*, ed. by Ian Donaldson  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)

*Masques*

*The Complete Masques*, ed. by Stephen Orgel  
(London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975)

*Conversations*

*The Oxford Ben Jonson*

*Discoveries*

*The Oxford Ben Jonson*

All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the *Riverside Shakespeare*, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

## ABBREVIATIONS

*CompD - Comparative Drama*

*EIC - Essays in Criticism*

*ELH - English Literary History*

*ELN - English Language Notes*

*ELR - English Literary Renaissance*

*JEGP - Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

*MLN - Modern Language Notes*

*MLQ - Modern Language Quarterly*

*MLR - Modern Language Review*

*MP - Modern Philology*

*OED - Oxford English Dictionary*

*PMLA - Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*

*PQ - Philological Quarterly*

*RenD - Renaissance Drama (formerly Renaissance News)*

*SEL - Studies in English Literature*

*ShS - Shakespeare Survey*

*SQ - Shakespeare Quarterly*

*TLS - Times Literary Supplement*

*H & S* - as explained in the Notes on Procedure (pp. v-vii) this will represent Herford and the Simpsons' edition of the *Complete Works of Ben Jonson* throughout the thesis.



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ben Jonson was not a republican. Ben Jonson was not an absolutist. Ben Jonson desired a limited monarchy. Ben Jonson believed in republicanism. Ben Jonson did not counsel the abolition of monarchy. Ben Jonson sought to extend the rights of the monarch's subjects. All of these contradictory statements and more are true about the paradoxical figure of Ben Jonson, public theatre dramatist and court masquer.

This thesis seeks to explore, using a number of different critical approaches, Jonson's thoughts on republicanism and in particular his representation of them in his drama. In order to do so it adopts a different approach to much Jonsonian criticism which has tended to view the public theatre dramatist from the vantage point of his often simultaneous career as court masquer to the court of King James VI and I. The thesis will argue that to adopt such a perspective is necessarily limiting in the picture it presents of the complex Jonsonian personality and politics, suggesting as it does a figure wholly answerable to, and writing in support of, the monarch. Just as a failing of the otherwise innovative work carried out in the name of New Historicism, and to a certain extent Cultural Materialism, is its intense concentration upon the power of the monarch and the court as

symbols in early modern society, neglecting as it does the important forum provided by parliament, so too have critical considerations of Jonson suffered from this imbalance ignoring a similar forum for debate within the Jonsonian text and suppressing therefore more radical and subversive elements within them.<sup>1</sup> A more nuanced reading of Jonson is sought here.

Republicanism is itself a slippery and complex term and the varied approach of the different chapters of this thesis will confirm Jonson's engagement with the question of republicanism on a number of often very different levels. "Republic" is a term which has come to have a very precise constitutional meaning in contemporary society; in the early modern period it was rather more open. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists 1631 as the first official usage of "republic" as referring to particular states having this kind of constitution. In the earlier part of the seventeenth century the term referred more generally to the state or common weal; however a republic was also a state in which ultimate power rested with the populace and their elected representatives - and here is where the importance of the parliamentary forum comes

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt did write a couple of earlier articles - 'The False Ending in *Volpone*', *JEGP*, 75 (1976), 90-104, and 'Loudun and London' (on *The Devil is an Ass*), *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1986), 326-46 - which are concerned with Jonsonian drama but Jonson was a noticeable absence from the complex of figures discussed in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For a related reassessment of Shakespeare, see Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays in Shakespearean Authority* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).

in - as opposed to a state controlled absolutely by a single ruler, a commonwealth in other words. The way in which a term like “republic” or “republican” shades into questions of commonwealth, common good, and community in this period will be crucial for this thesis.

Annabel Patterson has written recently of the ‘republican agenda’ of the early modern period, suggesting that there was a ‘general understanding of republican values’ at this time and that alongside this general understanding ‘there was considerable, and fertile, range of opinion’.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that there is often a republican subtext even in seemingly apolitical contexts, which can be registered by the marking of certain ‘ideologically freighted words’ and related questions of liberty, freedom, absolutism, equity, equality, the popular, the populace, and Magna Carta. These questions will be central amongst those we see debated within the context of Jonsonian drama.

An important initial question concerns the extent of Jonson’s exposure to the “classical republicanism”, by which I refer to the range of writings on the Ancient Roman republic (and comparisons with the Empire), which historians have seen as such an important political and philosophical influence in the early

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<sup>2</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 211-12.

modern period.<sup>3</sup> During the Renaissance these writings, by Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, and others, were frequently filtered through the work of continental humanists such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Justus Lipsius, and Jean Bodin, and in turn took on a localized form within an English context.

Blair Worden has remarked that ‘The ideas of the English republicans are not easy to classify . . . Writing in order to shape events, they adapted their arguments and their emphases to immediate circumstances.’<sup>4</sup> He has elsewhere indicated that whilst in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century England ‘there was admiration for classical (and aristocratic) republican virtue, there was no suggestion that England could or should become a republic.’<sup>5</sup> In a connected vein by no means do I intend to present Jonson as a republican in any active political sense of the term but I do believe that he toyed seriously (and the oxymoron is intentional) with ideas of limited monarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), and Blair Worden, ‘Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution’ in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh Trevor-Roper*, ed. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 182-200, and ‘English Republicanism’, in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Political Thought*, ed. by J.H. Burns and assd. by Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 443-75.

<sup>4</sup> Worden, ‘English Republicanism’, p. 443.

<sup>5</sup> Blair Worden, ‘Shakespeare and Politics’, *ShS*, 44 (1992), 1-15 (p. 6).

The singular figure of the Venetian Doge fascinated political Europe representing as it did a form of controlled or limited monarchy within an ostensibly republican context; one myth fostered by Renaissance, republican Venice was that it was the direct descendant of the Ancient Roman Empire, a paradox in itself. Jonson explored the advantages and disadvantages of limited monarchy (open or covert) in a number of his plays (see in particular Chapter Three on *Poetaster*, *Sejanus*, and *Cynthia's Revels*).

Jonson certainly had access to this range of writings that come under the heading of "classical republicanism"; he was, in particular, highly engaged with the new post-humanist politics and history stemming from Italy.<sup>6</sup> It was from sources such as Machiavelli's *Discourses* and the innumerable political tracts on the Venetian constitution that the language of republicanism in

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the main expositor of Machiavellian political theory in Dutch writing at this time was Justus Lipsius, the influence of whose writings on Jonson has been charted by Robert C. Evans, *Jonson, Lipsius, and the Politics of Renaissance Stoicism* (Wakefield, NH: Longwood, 1992), and Daniel Boughner in his article, 'Jonson's Use of Lipsius in *Sejanus*', *MLN*, 73 (1958), 247-55. See also Boughner, 'Sejanus and Machiavelli', *SEL*, 1 (1960), 81-100.

the seventeenth century largely derived,<sup>7</sup> especially the concept of the '*stato misto*'.

Venice was for the Renaissance a perfect paradigm of the classical Polybian concept of a mixed constitution managed by a combination of the single ruler, an elected few, and the ultimate power of the many - the populace. How real such a notion was in the closed oligarchy of the Venetian senate is a matter for debate but the myth was nevertheless a potent one.

The myth of Venice as a stable and peaceful constitutional state was propagated not only by the Venetian patriciate themselves but taken up and proclaimed in other Italian city-states, even ostensible rivals such as Florence: 'Throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it formed part of a language of republicanism which stood in opposition to increasingly absolutist theories of government.'<sup>8</sup> Questions of specifically Venetian republicanism will be seen in this thesis as

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<sup>7</sup> Jonson famously cites Machiavelli's *The Prince* in his commonplace book *Timber; or, Discoveries* and it is a case that *The Prince* largely determined Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic understanding of Machiavelli. That is not to say that exposure to the more republican text of the *Discourses* was not possible; cf. Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', *ShS*, 38 (1985), 115-30, for a related argument on Shakespeare and the *Discourses*.

<sup>8</sup> Eco Haitsma Mulier, 'The Language of Seventeenth-Century Republicanism in the United Provinces: Dutch or European?', in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 179-95 (p. 184).

being crucial to an understanding of Jonson's *Volpone* (see Chapter Five).

Dutch rebels, opposing Habsburg Spain in the United Provinces in the late sixteenth century, adopted the notion of the *stato misto*, and the republican terminology these rebels increasingly employed during their lengthy and uneven revolt against Spanish rule was also hugely indebted to the political tracts stemming from and about Republican Venice.<sup>9</sup> Mulier, examining the linguistic aspects of the conflict, observes:

Certainly the language of classical republicanism, of which the myth of Venice was an embodiment, served, at times, purely rhetorical ends. But it was also incorporated into a number of political tracts as an analogy for the Dutch Republic, which was already being described as a mixed state by the beginning of the seventeenth century. In this way an attempt was made to clarify the undefined and tense relationship which existed between the stadtholder and the other parts of the structure.<sup>10</sup>

but adds that this was not necessarily an immediate occurrence; the republican vocabulary now associated with the revolt was not inevitable from the outset. The “language of republicanism” mentioned here is essentially an invocation of ancient and civic liberties by the Dutch rebels, of the rights of the community as against the absolute power of the monarch, rather than a

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<sup>9</sup> Martin van Gelderen, ‘The Machiavellian Moment and the Dutch Revolt: The Rise of Neostoicism and Dutch Republicanism’, in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. by Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 205-23.

<sup>10</sup> Mulier, p. 187.

committed struggle to establish a republican constitution from the outset (since many of the Dutch magnates of the States-General were protecting their rights against Habsburg interventions).

The idea of a *stato misto* is an attractive but unstable idea that allows for greater stress on any one of the three elements involved, hence so often were early modern republics oligarchical in nature. The ideologies of republicanism and the language in which these ideas are defined in different contexts are crucial. In the Dutch instance popular liberties rather than an open democracy were being encouraged.

The role of republican debate in English politics could be seen as following a similar path to the Dutch experience, from initial linguistic interest evolving only gradually into active republican politics. The House of Commons debates of the 1630s and 1640s employed republican terminology (often with reference to ancient precedent, including Magna Carta) in order to facilitate discussion of subjects' rights in the face of what was seen by many as the abuse of prerogative by the monarch; but notions of citizenship and community rights were often invoked without the full force of the debate, or the full valency of the words being utilized, being recognized at the time (a comparison can be drawn with present-day debates in Parliament and the somewhat vague



and manipulative use of terms such as “community” and “general public”).

Ben Jonson had a more than linguistic experience of the Dutch Revolt.<sup>11</sup> In 1591 he abandoned his stepfather’s trade of bricklaying and joined the English army stationed in the Netherlands. Since the pay of a common soldier was only equivalent to that of a bricklayer, Jonson’s biographer, David Riggs, suggests that this was a far from prudent decision and taken for other than material reasons.<sup>12</sup> Riggs however spends little time examining exactly what these reasons might have been; he records the episode as indicative of Jonson’s innately aggressive character and swiftly moves on:

To judge from Jonson’s reminiscences [*in the Conversations with Drummond* <sup>13</sup>], he joined the army for psychological rather than material reasons. “In his service in the Low Countries,” he recalled, “he had in the face of both the Campes killed ane Enemie and taken opima spolia from him.” Once Jonson had killed his man, he returned home “soone” - the wording of Drummond’s notation suggests that he did not

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<sup>11</sup> For the more complex reading of that term as covering in fact three distinct revolts and a detailed history of the course of the conflict, see Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 17-18.

<sup>13</sup> There are obvious difficulties in citing as “truth” Drummond’s subsequent gossip notations of his conversations with Jonson, see Ian Donaldson’s introductory essay to his *The Oxford Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

serve out this time - presumably because he had accomplished what he set out to do.<sup>14</sup>

There seem to be too many gaps in this particular account. It is certainly worth noting that Jonson’s choice of descriptive vocabulary - *opima spolia* - is a Roman term and therefore a pointer to Jonson’s awareness of the classical republican tradition in recalling this conflict; even in the group context of war he continues to flaunt his independence - educational and political.

Jonson’s experience fed directly into his drama: there is a large number of specifically Dutch references embodied in the text of *The Alchemist* (1610). In IV.iii. Face refers to the “Spanish Don” (Surly in disguise), in what is clearly intended as an insult, as ‘Egmont’s bastard’:

SUBTLE FACE	‘Slud, he does look too fat to be a Spaniard. Perhaps some Fleming, or some Hollander got him In D’Alva’s time: Count Egmont’s bastard. ( <i>The Alchemist</i> , IV.iii.28-30) <sup>15</sup>
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Egmont was a Dutch magnate who remained loyal to the crown despite constant disappointment of his political hopes by the Spanish King’s underhand methods; in many senses Egmont was fatally tricked by the crown, facing death at their hands when

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<sup>14</sup> Riggs, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> The edition of *The Alchemist* used throughout is that contained within *Selected Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. by Martin Butler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), II, henceforth *The Alchemist*.

Alva took over government of the Low Countries (inaugurating the infamous Council of Blood).

Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias, usually described as “Puritan” visitors to the Blackfriars house in *The Alchemist*, are, more accurately, Dutch Anabaptists - a particularly pronounced sect, many of whom fled to London in order to evade Catholic persecution in the Dutch northern provinces. Tribulation is a ‘Pastor of Amsterdam’ and the stereotypically named Ananias is a ‘Deacon of there’. Subtle’s discourse with the emigrants is studded with Dutch references and jokes.

It is the linguistic role of republicanism in the Dutch conflict that I have mapped out in this introduction that I would argue was the greatest influence on Jonson. The language(s) of republicanism offered not a viable political alternative to the present situation but a means of discussing potential alterations and improvements that might be made. In a situation remarkably akin to the progress of the revolt of the United Provinces, the slow and complicated advance in seventeenth-century England towards the civil wars of the 1640s was not a result of a sudden upsurge of republican radicals but rather a sign of gradual acceptance of the need for change, constitutional or otherwise. The execution of the King was the final action in a long line of attempts to reach agreement and the republican language subsequently adopted

represented a need to establish a political context and precedent for the unwarranted state of affairs (and affairs of state).

Jonson was a writer who throughout his career engaged with the semantic shifts that political language was undergoing. His “republicanism” is a mark of his participation in the debate and that participation extends to his poetry and drama. As well as registering and annotating direct republican references in Jonson’s plays this thesis seeks to place Jonson’s approach to theatre and its conventions within a theoretical context of republicanism, recognizing, as I believe Jonson himself does, the republicanism inherent in the dramatic genre itself with its co-production of meaning between writer, director, actors, and audience (see Chapter Six on *The Alchemist*). Consequently it redefines the almost commonplace notion of Jonson’s “anti-theatricalism” which I see as being not only a far more playful stance than has previously been suggested but as one that in fact masks a far more radical awareness of the potential of the audience for multiple readings (see Chapter Seven on *Bartholomew Fair*).

A related sense of “republicanism” in terms of flexibility, pluralism, and multiplicity is traced in Jonson’s printed matter. The thesis adopts a fresh approach to the 1616 folio printing of the *Workes*, refusing to accord it the fixed and definitive position it has heretofore been accorded in the Jonsonian biography (see

Chapter Two on the *Every Man* plays, and a parallel effort to recuperate *The Devil is an Ass* in Chapter Nine).

As questions of republicanism and audiences, republicanism and commonwealths, and republicanism and communities and the communal are found to be prevalent in the Jonsonian text and performance, the thesis begins to construct a theory of the communities of the Jonsonian drama (in Chapter Four looking at the community of women in his plays), finding in the late plays in particular a dominant concern with the role of the locality not only in theatre but also in politics (see Chapter Eight on *A Tale of a Tub*). Later chapters therefore examine the role of the press (Chapter Ten on *The Staple of News*), of drinking-houses (Chapter Eleven on *The New Inn*), of theatre, and of parliament, investigating questions of the rights of the localities and of parliament in a period of non-parliamentary rule in the 1630s.

In accordance with the interest of this thesis in varied forms of republicanism (actual, theatrical, communal), the variant chapters adopt different critical approaches and techniques. The thesis abuts at various points with performance theory, feminist studies, and post-structuralist ideologies. A particular engagement with New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, and with recent critics of Jonson is carried out, recognizing both their

recuperation of Jonson and the inadequacies of their monarchy-dominated perspective and orthodox interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

In his commonplace book, *Timber; or, Discoveries*, itself further textual evidence, if it were needed, of a seventeenth-century desire for a common ground, a common place, a commonwealth of learning, Ben Jonson remarks:

I could never think the study of wisdom confined only to the philosopher: or of piety to the divine; or of state to the politic. But that he which can feign a commonwealth (which is the poet) can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgements, inform it with religion and morals is all these.<sup>17</sup>

The above quotation is more usually read as a sign of Jonson's Platonic ambitions, envisioning a poet-ruler as an extension of the philosopher-ruler of the *Republic*, yet in the context of this thesis

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<sup>16</sup> With current interest in the early modern marketplace, largely influenced by Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Jonson is re-entering the debate. Richard Dutton's new book in press this summer (forthcoming, Macmillan) engages with related questions. My argument remains however that the interest in Jonson as either masquer or as proto-capitalist rarely depicts him in a radical political vein. Martin Butler's recent spate of articles has been invaluable here in reclaiming Jonson's later plays for socio-historical consideration but has tended to support a rather more traditional, orthodox reading of the author himself. For his most recent assessment see 'Ben Jonson and the Limits of Courtly Panegyric', in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. by Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 91-116.

<sup>17</sup> *Timber; or, Discoveries* in Donaldson, *The Oxford Ben Jonson*, ll.1043-48; *H & S*, ll.1032-38, henceforth *Discoveries*. I have elected to use this modern spelling edition but, since unfortunately the line references differ substantially from the version in *H & S* VIII, I have placed the *H & S* line references for *Discoveries* alongside those for the Donaldson throughout the text of the thesis.

we can see that Ben Jonson did indeed feign commonwealths and that through his theatrical republic he sought to counsel the political actors of his day.

CHAPTER TWO: "BEGINNING HIS STUDIES OF THIS KIND":  
 LITERARY IMPERIALISM, TEXTUAL VARIANCE,  
 AND THE *EVERY MAN PLAYS*

I: Variants and variance

Jonson's 1616 *Workes* is viewed by many critics as indubitable proof of the dramatist's drive towards fixity; he sought, they claim, to embody his written words in the concrete form of print, altering those areas of his manuscripts with which he was dissatisfied, omitting substandard texts, and controlling and manipulating readerly reception via material factors such as prefaces, prologues, arguments, acrostics, epilogues, marginalia, and frontispieces.<sup>1</sup> The copiousness of my own description of Jonson's work on the 1616 Folio, however, surely suggests a constant process of revision, rather than textual petrification.

It is often preferred as a reason for Jonson's querulous relationship with Inigo Jones that the successful dramatist found it difficult to accept that his writings for masques were only part of the spectacular whole and not in any way predominant over stage, scenery, or music. It is suggested that by printing the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Healy's recent overview of Renaissance theory, *New Latitudes: Theory and English Renaissance Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992) repeats this formulaic reading of Jonson's *Workes*.



masque texts in the *Workes* Jonson sought to exclude or at least diminish Jones's contributions. Masque studies however constantly reflect that these printed scripts rarely tell the whole story and an astute reader such as Jonson can scarcely have been deluded as to otherwise. He may well have wished to preserve for posterity these 'occasional texts' but more despotic aims seem unlikely. In truth he attacks Jones via the parodic figure of In-and-In Medley in *A Tale of a Tub* (c. 1633) for being an imperialist over, rather than a collaborator on, masques:

He'll do't alone, sir. He will join with no man,  
 Though he be a joiner. In design, he calls it.  
 He must be sole inventor: In-and-In  
 Draws with no other in's project, he'll tell you,  
 It cannot else be feazible, or conduce:  
 Those are his ruling words!

(*A Tale of a Tub*, V.ii.35-40)<sup>2</sup>

Jones's father had been a joiner and Jonson's painful sense of patriarchal influence is evident even here. Oddly enough, the memory of Jones was as likely to be fixed in people's minds by such caricatures. Even the masque texts were subject to alteration, omission, and occlusion and so <sup>were</sup> scarcely acts of historical fixity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The edition used of *A Tale of a Tub* throughout the thesis is that contained within *Selected Plays* II, henceforth *A Tale of a Tub*.

<sup>3</sup> See David Lindley, 'Embarrassing Ben: Masques for Frances Howard', *ELR*, 16 (1986), 343-59, on the suppression of the facts surrounding the occasions of the two wedding masques Jonson wrote for Frances Howard, and Martin Butler, ' "We Are One Man's All": Jonson's *The Gipsies Metamorphosed* ', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 21 (1991), 253-73, where he discusses the radically different versions available of the post-Folio masque.

A further argument against the fixity of the Folio is that Jonson did not cease to write in 1616: in truth he always intended a sequel volume (eventually published posthumously in 1640 and seen through print by Sir Kenelm Digby) but proved perhaps a victim of his own literary arrogance. Jennifer Brady has shown how the Folio, intended in many ways to stamp Jonson's authority on the literary community, became a veritable albatross around his neck, stellifying his pre-1616 work and providing his competitors with the perfect means to condemn his later experimentation on the stage:

The fifth act of Jonson's career could be described as an object lesson in the hazards of constructing a monument to oneself in mid-life - and then, through bad judgement, or miscalculation, surviving long enough to see one's *Workes* proclaimed one's cenotaph.<sup>4</sup>

The canonicity of the Folio was, she says, often 'invoked to a strategic end: to hold Jonson hostage to a remembered perfection.'<sup>5</sup>

*Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and *The Devil is an Ass*, completed by 1616, were held back for inclusion in the proposed second volume, perhaps contributing to the near-mythological status of the year 1616 as a "turning point" for Jonson. The *Workes*

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<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Brady, ' "Noe Fault but Life": Jonson's Folio as Monument and Barrier', in *Ben Jonson's 1616 Folio*, ed. by Jennifer Brady and W.H. Herendeen (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1991), pp. 192-216 (p. 193). My thanks also to Tim Murray for a fruitful discussion on this issue.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

commence with *Every Man In His Humour*, written in 1598; not only does that occlude the fact that Jonson's first play was not this but *The Case is Altered* (1597), or possibly a work no longer extant,<sup>6</sup> but also that this printed version of *Every Man In His Humour* was not even the "original" 1598 playtext. My inverted commas are evidence in themselves of the complexity of the use of such a term as originality with application to the early modern period.<sup>7</sup> *Every Man In(F)* (as I shall henceforth refer to it) is a heavily revised, transplanted version of the text as printed in the three earlier Quarto editions (henceforth *Every Man In(Q)*) and even the frontispiece to those editions indicates that their printed text was not the stage show verbatim but contained 'more than hath been publicly spoken or acted.'

Jonson was always scrupulous about details but a critical tendency since Herford and the Simpsons's collected works (11 volumes, 1925-1952) has been to accept the Folio readings of certain plays for which we possess alternative manuscripts as

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<sup>6</sup> James Shapiro emphasizes that many of Jonson's earlier and collaborative texts are now lost providing us with only a partial understanding of the trajectory of his career: he appears from stage registers to have started out as a heroic tragedian in the style of Marlowe. *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> In a recent résumé essay on 'Renaissance/Early Modern studies', Leah Marcus observes that a major focus of recent scholarly work on the period has been textual instabilities and indeterminacies, *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: MLA, 1992), pp. 41-63.

somehow fixed, final, or definitive. Only if the authenticity of the Folio details are doubtful are amendments made from the available Quartos in modern printings of the plays. Admittedly for some plays, such as *Epicoene*, we only have the Folio version but in the case of plays such as *Poetaster*, *Cynthia's Revels*, *Sejanus*, and *Every Man In His Humour* which all underwent alteration after their Quarto publications this seems a dangerously reductive approach: 'a double authority must be recognized'.<sup>8</sup> Herford and the Simpsons favoured Folio versions partly as an attempt to redress the balance which for some time had existed in favour of Quarto readings: in the 1990s there is need for a new edition of the Jonsonian canon.

Jonson himself was under no illusion as to the fixity of print: as *The Staple of News* (1626) proves, he was fascinated by the ephemera of news offices and print houses. This is embodied in the fate of the news-office in *The Staple of News* which simply dissolves, at least in audience imaginations, in a manner directly akin to Subtle's laboratory or Prospero's masque.

The Folio copytexts need to be seen in the context of their own materiality: the plays, the poetry, and the masques need to

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<sup>8</sup> Fredson Bowers, 'Multiple Authority: New Problems and Concepts of Copy-text', *The Library*, 5th series, 27 (1972), 85-86, cited by Philip Ayres in 'The Iconography of Jonson's *Sejanus*, 1605: Copy-Text for the Revels Edition', in *Editing Texts: Papers From a Conference at the Humanities Research Centre, May 1985*, ed. by J.C. Eade (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, 1985), pp. 47-53.

be seen within the shaping structures of frontispieces, prefaces, and dedicatory epistles. The Folio does not mark a culminating moment in Jonson's career but rather a median statement that, Janus-like, looks both backwards and forwards in terms of his career. Clearly not an act of terminus, the Folio volume is replete with the same tensions which inhabit the individual Quarto texts. These same tensions can be registered not only in the plays but in the concept of the 1616 Folio as a whole. The Folio resists any singular critical/methodological approach: its problems and complexities are Jonson's own.

One of the most significant issues to arise from the adoption of a new perspective on the 1616 text is the calling into question of the fondness for critical depictions of Jonson in colonialist or imperialist terms when discussing his authorial philosophy.

Dryden's infamous phrase is oft-recalled: 'He invades Authors like a Monarch; what would be theft in other Poets is onely victory in him.'<sup>9</sup> The image is picked up by Robert Watson in his book *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy* which is tellingly subtitled *Literary Imperialism in the Comedies*:

Jonson's comedies are acts of theatrical imperialism. Through an ingenious system of parody, Jonson fights for artistic *lebensraum*. Jonson symbolically asserts his dominance over his rivals and their more conventional literary modes. Dryden's famous praise of Jonson's adaptations . . . aptly

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<sup>9</sup> John Dryden, 'An Essay of Dramatic Poesy', in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. by George Watson (London: Everyman, 1962), p. 69.

describes his strategy. Jonson's thefts are not furtive: they are tactics in a proud campaign for sovereignty in the drama. He systematically subsumes the more conventional plays of his competitors, forcing them to work for his exaltation, like the Asian Kings who lift Tamburlaine into greater glory by their very subjugation. Those rival plays become colonies within Jonson's empire, their native languages, and value systems redefined as merely quaint by incorporation into the imperial scheme.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from finding the militaristic strain of discourse here somewhat misleading, I resist colonial interpretations of Jonson's process and procedures. Not only the plays themselves, but Jonson's own career as well, are ripe for republican retrievalist readings. If, as William Blissett claims, *Catiline's* dramatist 'required his audience to think themselves back into republican Rome, to think republican thoughts', why not extend this thinking to encompass Jonson's authorial stance as a whole?<sup>11</sup>

The prefaces to a number of the Folio copytexts are evidence of such a republican potentiality establishing a working contract for the reading experience (prologues and epilogues might be seen to do the same for the theatrical experience). This contract is of an intrinsically modern nature and this relates not only to the Articles of Agreement that commence any given performance of *Bartholomew Fair* but also to the notion of *Poetaster* and *Sejanus* as plays which look forward to the imminent Jacobean reign,

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<sup>10</sup> Robert N. Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy: Literary Imperialism in the Comedies* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> William Blissett, 'Roman Ben Jonson', in Brady and Herendeen, p. 102.

attempting in the process to negotiate a working contract with the incoming monarch James VI of Scotland.<sup>12</sup> Many of the dedications attached to the Folio plays are financial projections, seeking similar contracts, no less optimistic in their premise than those of Meercraft in *The Devil is an Ass*, written in the same year.

As Kevin Donovan claims, there is a ‘need for greater understanding of the material production of the [Workes] and for a reevaluation of Folio readings where they differ from other authoritative texts.’<sup>13</sup> As well as arguing in more republican terms for a Jonson who was open to notions of multiple interpretation(s) and the production of meaning(s) by audiences, spectators, and readers alike, this chapter seeks to deal with, to use Jennifer Brady’s phrase, ‘the conspicuously complicated Jonsonian page’. As some of the parallel text editions have indicated, perhaps one of the most complicated examples of this is *Every Man In His Humour* (1598, 1601, 1616).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The arguments in the case of *Poetaster* and *Sejanus* gain weight from the fact of their alterations for inclusion in the Folio; comparison of quarto and folio texts can prove telling; see Ayres, ‘The Iconography of Jonson’s *Sejanus*’.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin J. Donovan, ‘Jonson’s Texts in the First Folio’, in Brady and Herendeen, pp. 23-37 (p. 23).

<sup>14</sup> John Caird’s production for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1986 made predominant use of the 1616 Folio but did conflate this with elements of the Quarto text, an indication of the theatrical value of the latter.

## II: Democratic interpretations

The prologue to *Every Man In(F)* is regularly invoked in support of critical ruminations on Jonson's dramatic theory and his authorial strategies; in it he explicitly aligns himself with neo-classical dramaturgical conventions, such as the unities of time, place, and action, as well as linguistic decorum and the provision of moral instruction through drama, and argues for the exclusion of highly incredible events that might stretch the imagination. In doing so Jonson appears to be ranging himself against the tenets of Shakespearean drama.

Perhaps in part the Prologue's implicit criticism of Shakespeare explains Jonson's addition of it only to the printed version of the play in 1616, the very year of Shakespeare's death:

Though need make many Poets, and some such  
 As art, and nature have not bettered much;  
 Yet ours, for want, hath not so loved the stage,  
 As he dare serve th'ill customs of the age:  
 Or purchase your delight at such a rate,  
 As, for it, he himself must justly hate.  
 To make a child, now swaddled, to proceed  
 Man, and then shoot up, in one beard, and weed,  
 Past threescore years: or, with three rusty swords,  
 And help of some few foot-and-half-foot words,  
 Fight over York, and Lancaster's long jars.

(*Every Man In(F)*, Prologue, ll.1-11)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The edition used of *Every Man In(F)* throughout this thesis is that in the New Mermaids series, ed. by Martin Seymour-Smith (London: A & C Black, 1966; repr. 1988), the most recent modern spelling edition of the play. The text of *Every Man In(Q)* is that in *H & S III*, although I have also had recourse in both instances to the parallel text edition, ed. by J.W. Lever, *Ben Jonson's Every Man In His Humour: A Parallel Text Edition of the 1601 Quarto and the 1616 Folio* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971).



This is a plangent attack on the 1590s vogue for history or chronicle plays and suggests that verse is a hyperbolic medium for dramatic dialogue.

In the Folio retrospective claims of innovation and difference are being made for *Every Man In* : *Henry V* seems to be the primary focus of attack, the dramatic Other against which Jonson defines his own play:

He rather prays, you will be pleased to see  
One such, to-day, as other plays should be,  
Where neither Chorus wafts you o'er the seas;  
Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please;  
(*Every Man In(F)*, Prologue, ll.13-16)

The *Henry IV* plays will be mentioned in similar vein in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (henceforth *Every Man Out*) when there is a direct appeal (from the Chorus) to the audience for them to render the acerbic Macilente as 'fat as Sir John Falstaff', thus restressing the suspension of disbelief involved in the witnessing of (ostensibly Shakespearean) history plays. Anne Barton has, quite rightly, stated that she registers no real animosity in these statements;<sup>16</sup> Jonson is not truly damning Shakespeare, merely laying claim to the specificity of his own texts which strive to be slices of contemporary life, an 'image of the times' featuring 'deeds, and language, such as men do use:' (*Every Man In(F)* Prologue, l.21), that Jonsonian phrase which Wordsworth would

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<sup>16</sup> See the account of the play in Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

pick up on for equally explicit claims to innovation in the late eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Peter Womack traces a political strategy in this quest for individualistic artistic form, comparing it to the idea of “humours” in the series of *Every Man* plays:

The image of the humour as a monstrous absence of form projects a counter-image of the mind as absolute monarch, the sole source of value and order. In this sense, humours comedy appears as a logical development of neo-classical dramaturgy in general, producing in physical and psychological terms the juridical, arbitrary power which, as opposed to a kind of self-sustaining organism, decrees the unity and viability of individual consciousness. This absolutist duality of monarchy and anarchy appears not only within the microcosm (the humorous individual as an ungovernable state) but also in the humourist’s relationship with the society of the play.<sup>18</sup>

Womack’s determination to read in absolutist terms Jonson’s control and critique of the societies of his plays is antithetical to my own, which prefers to regard the complex communities of the Jonsonian stage as part of his general openness to multiplicity and pluralism, and an acceptance of a degree of anarchy as integral rather than inimical to his work. Whilst agreeing that enshrined in the humours theory itself is a demand for balance and an understanding that disease and disorder result from an imbalance, a highly conservative *modus vivendi*, I am anxious to stress that

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<sup>17</sup> cf. Anne Barton, ‘The Road from Penshurst: Wordsworth, Ben Jonson, and Coleridge in 1802’, *EIC*, 37 (1987), 209-34. Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights* also makes the point that despite his caustic comments against them Jonson continued to be influenced by both Shakespeare and Inigo Jones throughout his career.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 50.

Jonson is not expounding that doctrine without strong qualification in his so-called “humours” plays (their literary-critical labels once again proving misleading). The humours assumed by the characters are mere surfaces; they amount in the end to virtually nothing. The imbalance consists in the excessive fixity of their role and their own intransigent self-belief, intransigent in the face of reality, in the shape they have assumed - witness Stephen(o), Bobadill(a) and so on.<sup>19</sup> Theatricality endorses flexibility and adaptability: that is its Machiavellian argument. It is the falsity of fixed assumptions that Jonson seeks to expose, less in the guise of an invading monarch than as a recorder of offences and a potential democrat.

Jonson’s democracy is embodied in the emendations made to the Quarto text of *Every Man In* for the purposes of the Folio publication. The prose of the “original” is not substantially altered. Some salient details are and the play’s locality undergoes a considerable shift (from Italy to England), but the rarer, larger dialogue alterations are worth focusing upon because they indicate a shift away from the more obvious and overt absolutist and patriarchalist readings of the Quarto towards something

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Terence Dunford, ‘Consumption of the World: Reading, Eating, and Imitation in *Every Man Out of His Humour*’, *ELR*, 14 (1984), 131-47.

which embraces multiplicity, pluralism, and republicanism in the Folio.

One fundamental change is the alteration of Lorenzo Senior's soliloquy on reason at II.ii.(Q); this metamorphoses into Old Know'ell's reflections at II.iii.(F) on virtue by example. Lorenzo Senior's monologue is a piece of classical wisdom, plausibly even expounding Aristotelian-Horatian ethical philosophy to which Jonson himself might be thought to adhere. The speech has however strongly monarchical and absolutist overtones:

Yet can I not but worthily admire  
 At nature's art: who (when she did inspire  
 This heat of life) plac'd Reason (as a king)  
 Here in the head, to have the marshalling  
 Of our affections; and with souveraigntie  
 To sway the state of our weake emperie.  
 (*Every Man In(Q)*, II.ii.11-16)

Womack's binary monarchy/anarchy reading is applicable here but this should not be taken as Jonson's view. Lorenzo Senior makes an overstated case for the role of the patriarch in parenting, marriage, and society at large:

But as in divers commonwealthes we see,  
 The forms of government to disagree:  
 Even so in man who searcheth soon shal find  
 As much or more varietie of mind.  
 Some mens affection like a sullen wife,  
 Is with her husband reason still at strife.  
 Others (like proud Arch-traitors that rebell  
 Against their souveraigne) practise to expell,  
 Their liege Lord Reason, and not shame to tread  
 Upon his holy and annointed head,  
 But as that land or nation best doth thrive,  
 Which to smooth-fronted peace is most proclive,  
 So doth that mind, whose fair affections rang'd

By reasons rules, stand constant and unchanged  
 Els, if the power of reason be not such,  
 Why do we attribute to him so much?  
 (*Every Man In(Q)*, II.ii.17-32)

The subjective dominance of this theory in Lorenzo's mind is what renders it his humour/obsession and therefore a total contradiction in terms - it displays his lack of reason. It is interesting that Lorenzo, the exponent of these undiluted absolutist doctrines in the play, is also the opponent of poetry: he resists the potential for that form to produce a variety of meanings and perhaps this is more revelatory of the Jonsonian stance than anything.

Under the translated shape and title of Old Kno'well in *Every Man In(F)* the character makes a less starkly absolutist, although no less authoritarian, statement on virtue at II.iii. That he stresses virtue by example is significant since that was the classical remedy to the self-belief in rectitude that Lorenzo Senior has fallen prone to. Desiring the reverence of age and its attendant authority (a precursor of these views is Gloucester in *King Lear*, a play itself available in variant versions and available to Jonson at the time of his Folio revision), Old Kno'well blames parents for misguiding their children by setting them bad examples and therefore effectively tutoring them in vice and sin. Not once however does he acknowledge any possible personal

faults as a parent: he seemingly transcends his own sociological argumentation:

Neither have I  
Dressed snails, or mushrooms curiously before him,  
Perfumed my sauces, and taught him to make 'hem;  
Preceding still, with my grey gluttony  
At all the ordinaries:  
(*Every Man In(F)*, II.iii.51-55)

He fails to recognize that his own strict, stifling patriarchy has counselled his son to seek his liberty, an anarchic opposition in Old Kno'well's eyes; it even leads the elder to demean himself by setting spies to watch his son and pursuing Ed to the city - the locus in his imagination of everyone's moral downfall.

In her account of the play Barton rather surprisingly erects a defence of Old Kno'well.<sup>20</sup> She claims that his name is an indication of his insight and yet to me it indicates the opposite. In its apostrophe the name allows for an ambiguity comparable to that of Lovel's nomenclature in *The New Inn* (1629) - he might be Love all, Love well, or Love ill. Kno'well might know well but on the other hand he might not and the 't' is a missing letter to whose absence our attention is drawn, especially in terms of the name's phonetics. He certainly doesn't know his son well enough to detect the relative innocence of his correspondence with Wellbred,

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<sup>20</sup> See Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

for all its innuendo and adolescent tomfoolery; in fact he completely misreads the letter that is accidentally delivered into his hands thus setting the plot of the play in motion.

The letter itself is probably one of the most significant Quarto to Folio alterations. The plot of *Every Man In(Q and F)* is set in motion by an 'act of literary criticism'.<sup>21</sup> This critical act is carried out by Lorenzo Senior/Old Kno'well and the given audience:

as often happens, practical criticism, confronted with an alien text, turns into moral paternalism. Kno'well is so disturbed by what he finds in the letter that he decides to follow his son to London and spy on him. This is not because the letter contains any incriminating evidence, but because of its style. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Because the letter is read aloud onstage (a familiar Elizabethan and Jacobean device - witness Malvolio's letter reading in *Twelfth Night*, another poignant case of misinterpretation), we are as an audience invited to compare Old Kno'well's drastic judgement of the text with our own. His over-determining anxiety is self-evident (we have already seen it in operation with regard to his opinions on reason and personal rectitude): it causes him to miss entirely the playful tone and deliberate ambivalence of the text. He is seemingly unable to read between the lines and Jonson

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<sup>21</sup> Womack, p. 76.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

possibly panders to his audiences by suggesting they will behave otherwise.

The tone of playfulness is increasingly evident in the Folio version; the newly colloquial allusiveness of the letter may be due to the geographical shift from Florence to London:

The language has a miscellaneous allusiveness. There are the fantastic and punning etymologies for place-names, the city bywords about the Levant Company and Guildhall juries, and the flickers of stylistic pastiche - fairground barker in 'willing to be shown, and worthy to be seen' and commercial-legal in the pseudo-contract of the last sentence.<sup>23</sup>

This notion of the letter imitating a contract is interesting in the light of Jonson's own understanding of the contractual obligations between himself, his writings, his patrons, and his audiences.

The Quarto's letter from Prospero to Lorenzo Junior:

Sirha Lorenzo, I muse we cannot see thee at Florence: 'Sblood, I doubt, Apollo hath got thee to be his Ingle, that thou comest not abroad, to visit thine old friends; well, take heede of him; hee may doe somewhat for his houshold servants, or so; But for his Retayners, I am sure, I have knowne some of them, that have followed him, three, foure, five yeere together, scorning the world with their bare heeles, and at length bene glad for a shift, (though no cleane shift) to lye a whole winter, in halfe a sheete, cursing Charles wayne, and the rest of the starres intolerably.

(*Every Man In(Q)*, l.i.142-51)

transforms in the Folio to an invitation from Wellbred to Ed

Kno'well to 'change an old shirt, for a whole smock, with us' (*Every Man In(F)*, l.i.153-54) - a woman being a smock, this invites Ed to alter his stuffed shirt of a father for a woman without venereal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-78.



disease (hence a ‘whole’ woman). The Folio letter is full of sexual innuendo of this nature:

Do not conceive that antipathy between us, and Hogsden; as was between Jews and hogs-flesh. Leave thy vigilant father, alone, to number over his green apricots, evening, and morning, o’the north-west wall: an’ I had been his son, I had saved him the labour, long since; if, taking in all the young wenches, that pass by, at the backdoor, and coddling every kernel of the fruit for ’hem, would ha’ served. . .

(*Every Man In(F)*, I.i.154-60)

Coddling means ‘stewing’ but also plays on the word ‘cods’ (i.e. scrotum/testicles); green apricots made pregnant women vomit (witness Bosola’s trick in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*), hence the puns on ‘labour’.

Jonson also exploits the ambivalence of the written medium as a plot device elsewhere in his dramatic canon in *Sejanus*; not at the beginning of the play but as its climactic movement.

Tiberius’s letter to the Roman Senate expertly condemns his general whilst never making any explicit demand for his execution: responsibility is thrust back onto the senators/spectators/readers, a Jonsonian strategy in action if ever there was:

The language of the letter itself, moreover, dictates from point to point the theatrical progress of the scene; by its ambiguities provoking the waves of doubt, fear, and panic that seethe through the listening Senate. Tiberius’s duplicity and back-tracking find their linguistic counterpart in the winding, shifting indirections of the loose period, in the casually appended ‘thoughts’, ‘yets’, ‘excepts’, and ‘howsoevers’ that seem in one clause to endorse Sejanus, in

the next to suspect him, and end by destroying him altogether.<sup>24</sup>

The fixity of print, the absolutist author; neither is quite the point here. The audience, be it Senate, Roman public, or public theatre audience is crucial here, and as a body (politic) it is capable of multiple responses just like the population of the cities which operate not homogeneously but heterogeneously in so many of Jonson's plays and which in some respect will inevitably triumph over absolutist singularities such as those of Lorenzo Senior or Old Kno'well.

### III: The state of the city

The language of the Folio letter is replete with ambiguities and indeterminacies. It is exactly that aspect of it which Old Kno'well finds so threatening: it is the threat of the city, of the *urbs*, the urban gathering. Wellbred verbally metamorphoses himself into the protean representations of city life: 'The writer briefly adopts the character of an old clothes seller, a pimp, a merchant

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<sup>24</sup> Jonas Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 142.

company, a showman, a cook, and a lawyer'.<sup>25</sup> Audiences of *Bartholomew Fair* might feel this is also Jonson's art.<sup>26</sup>

The letter has a random asyndetic style:

The tone Kno'well so dislikes is decisively urban, not only in the derisive rusticity of its image of his own life, and not only in the extraordinary concentration of town references, but also in the casual, irresponsible movement from one whimsically chosen topic to the next. The meaning appears to have no firm control over the words; rather, the discourse lets itself be led by the chance associations of language, just as the *flâneur* follows the random energies and juxtapositions of the throng.<sup>27</sup>

and this reveals the potential openness to multiplicity implicit within Jonson's urban settings as opposed to more absolutist readings.

Wellbred's epistle is essentially that of the town mouse to the country mouse, a device frequently and famously used in so-called "Cavalier" poetry: Rochester's 'Letter from Artimesia in the Town to Chloe in the Country' is a prime exemplum.<sup>28</sup> In *Every Man In* the letter's city of origin undergoes a notorious shift between Quarto and Folio printings, from Florence, Italy to London, England. Critics have speculated that the geography was

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<sup>25</sup> Womack, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Examples of urban style to which Jonson would have had access are Horace's Satire I.9., and Epistles I.10 and I.15. The last case is presented as the mock-anxious enquiry of a town-dweller temporarily condemned to country life, and I.10 has an urbane speaker who discusses the subtle superiorities of town over country.

<sup>27</sup> Womack, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> A Horatian precedent for this is Satire II.6.

altered to facilitate the topographical detail that forms such a predominant aspect of the Folio text, and which, they argue, Jonson might have found more difficult in an Italian locale. I would suggest that Jonson's motive was no mere seeking of familiarity and ease of knowledge of an area but rather that the familiarity he now courted was that of the London audiences, as he had achieved so successfully in *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*.

I wish also to argue that the Italian context of the "original" *Every Man In* was not entirely superfluous. In the Quarto the nomenclature alone is telling: we have Lorenzo and Giuliano - names immediately evocative of the Medici family, the famous Florentine dynasty, and also of that period of Italian and European history which formed the basis of many dramatists' thinking about Italy during the early modern period.<sup>29</sup>

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Medici were essentially responsible in Florence for the political shift away from the republican constitution and towards virtual one-person rule, in 1532 becoming in a constitutional act the hereditary rulers of the city-state. Suggestions of Lorenzo Senior's absolutism are then inherent in his name. Interestingly he is not

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<sup>29</sup> See G.K. Hunter, 'English Folly and Italian Vice: The Moral Landscape of John Marston', in *Stratford Upon Avon Studies I: Jacobean Theatre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1960), pp. 85-112.

a Medici but a Pazzi: the Pazzi family were renowned for conspiring to assassinate and overthrow the Medici. The plot proved abortive but nevertheless we have enshrined in Lorenzo Senior's name the notion of an absolutist/republican dichotomy which characterized Florence and which characterizes Lorenzo's own paranoid sense of an opposition to and potential conspiracy against his patriarchal rule: the concerns he will register in the reading of Prospero's letter.

After the 1478 Pazzi conspiracy, the Medici assumed oligarchical control in the supposedly republican city-state. Two years after Lorenzo died a republic was re-formed with Savonarola's backing and Piero Soderini was sworn in as the *gonfaloniere*. *Every Man In(Q)* actually features a *gonfaloniere* amongst its *dramatis personae*, the figure of Doctor Clement, a fact frequently ignored in criticism of the play:

Why, doest thou not know him? he is the Gonfaloniere of the state here, an excellent rare Civilian, and a great scholler, but the onely mad merry olde fellow in Europe . . .  
(*Every Man In(Q)*, III.ii.47-50)

The transition of this character from Italian *dottore*, with all the *commedia dell'arte* connotations of the pedant doctor, to an English Justice of the Peace is generally viewed as unproblematic and insignificant. Yet an investigation of the role of a *gonfaloniere* suggests otherwise. The *gonfaloniere* had traditionally been an official involved in the raising of civic militia (essential according

to Machiavelli for the maintenance of any successful city-state or republic). The office was traditionally held in rotation but in a paradoxical effort to accord stability to the newly-founded Florentine Republic Soderini was made *gonfaloniere a vita*, that is for life. As with Lorenzo Senior, Doctor Clement embodies a complex absolutism in the Quarto text, a fact born directly out of the Italian locale.

If all politicians are not necessarily Machiavels (*Every Man Out*, II.vi. Grex, 166-68)<sup>30</sup> then why must all stage cities necessarily be London: why cannot Florence be Florence in *Every Man In(Q)*?<sup>31</sup> Jonson was perfectly capable in 1598 of writing a London setting had he wanted to. In 1599, just a year later after all, the English capital was to provide the amazing context for the central movement of *Every Man Out*, when the characters conglomerate in the middle aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The edition used throughout of *Every Man Out* is that contained within *H & S* III.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Leah Marcus's similar reading of the role of Vienna in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Readings and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> This is often seen as marking Jonson's entry into the realist mode (see Jonathan Haynes, *The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)) but to me it seems an archetypal piece of Jonsonian exaggeration with each character enthusiastically projecting their view of themselves in isolation in the midst of an environment, realist or theatrical, that can only serve to expose them.

#### IV: Recycling and re-use

Reworkings of a textual variety are carried out by Jonson in the *Every Man* plays, not only in terms of the Quarto to Folio journey of *Every Man In* but also in terms of his previous compositions. As far as extant manuscripts are concerned, we have remaining only the preceding play, *The Case is Altered*, but links are nevertheless clear in terms of the Italian location and the highly anglicized servants of *Every Man In* (Q and F). The coupling of the anglicized servants of *The Case is Altered* - Juniper and Onion (one sweet in smell to counteract the pungency of the other, the perfect double act) - is repeated and rendered even more perfunctory in *Every Man Out* in the form(s) of Orange and Clove. The latter pair are in virtual limbo in the middle aisle of St. Pauls, and the play's central act, Godot-like awaiting parts to perform which never arrive:

MITIS CORDATUS	What be these two, signior? Mary, a couple sir, that are meere strangers to the whole scope of our play; only come to walke a turne or two, i'this Scene of Paules, by chance. ( <i>Every Man Out</i> , III.i. Grex, 16-19) <sup>33</sup>
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*Every Man Out* announces its debt of theatrical exchange to *commedia dell'arte*: at IV.ii. Macilente refers to the citizen Deliro's

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<sup>33</sup> Watson, *Ben Jonson's Parodic Strategy*, regards the duo themselves as theatrical forerunners of Tom Stoppard's own Renaissance and Beckettian-inspired characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

efforts to feign the behaviour of a courtier in terms deriving from *commedia*: 'Hee's like the Zani, to a tumbler / That tries tricks after him, to make men laugh.' (*Every Man Out*, IV.ii.44-45).

Part of the motive for the Italianate setting of *Every Man In(Q)* is Jonson's desire to acknowledge to the audience the theatrical frame of reference for his play - unlike Matheo he is no filcher of other men's flowers.<sup>34</sup> In the course of the playtext Jonson invokes and reworks both Ancient Roman comedy and Renaissance Italian *commedia dell'arte*: Bobadilla is a curious amalgam of the two, both *miles gloriosus* and the braggart Spanish *capitano*. The *dottore* figure of Clement is similarly intertextually referential.

Jonson was clearly fascinated by the figure of the braggart soldier. His plays contain several variations on the theme: Bobadill(a) in *Every Man In(Q and F)*, Cavalier Shift in *Every Man Out*, through to Sir Glorious Tipto in *The New Inn*. In *Every Man In*, Musco/Brainworm's disguise as a military braggart is a parody of a parody, so complicated is the Jonsonian pastiche. Jonson refuses to locate heroism, other than false, in such characters. Bobadill(a)'s claims are so outrageous that to have fought in all the battles he catalogues he would be a century old: he claims in the

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<sup>34</sup> James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights*, makes the intriguing point that Matheo is plagiarizing Marlowe in this play, an act Jonson himself was scarcely innocent of in his career.



Quarto to have been involved in the factional struggle between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines in fifteenth-century Florence, as well as against the Turks in the sixteenth century. He also claims to have participated in the “discovery” of the New World: like those of Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*, a counterpart character of exaggerations and extravagances, Bobadill(a)’s fantasies are pure colonialism.

Thorello is of course a version of the *Pantalone* character, the husband who fears cuckoldry: the Jonsonian variation on that theme is to render the *Pantalone*-type a jealous paranoic (witness Corvino in *Volpone* and Fitzdottrel in *The Devil is an Ass*) who is not a victim of adultery at all unlike many of the *commedia* counterparts. Cob and Tib’s house is far from being the *commedia* *bordello* Thorello assumes it to be. As Robert Watson has suggested, Thorello is in many respects like his Folio counterpart Kately a victim of his own play-reading or play-going (this is also true of Fitzdottrel).<sup>35</sup>

Ironically enough another Folio addition will be to award Kately these lines following his statement of conversion: ‘I ha’ learned so much verse out of a jealous man’s part in a play.’ (*Every Man In(F)*, V.i.280-81). Interestingly, by 1616, Kately’s

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<sup>35</sup> Watson, *Ben Jonson’s Parodic Strategy*.

Quarto precedent had, as J.W. Lever has convincingly argued,<sup>36</sup> furnished forth a number of lines and influences for another jealous man's part on the stage, that of the eponymous lead in *Othello* (1604). The slippage of nomenclature from Thorello to Othello is deliberate enough and direct line echoes, detailed by Lever, confirm the theory. Perhaps unsurprisingly in view of Shakespeare's own participation in the first performances of this play, when writing his own theatrical rumination on jealousy and prejudice based in the Venetian republic and featuring a Florentine villain, he turned to his earlier stage experience for ideas.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Jonson is retrospectively laying claim to that precedent in 1616 - it is he himself who is in many respects the author of the play Kitley has seen.

Undoubtedly the relationship of Jonson's characters to other authors, contemporary or otherwise, is always revealing. In *Every Man Out*, Fungoso reads Sidney whilst awaiting the completion of his new suit; his notions of becoming a knight are similarly book-derived. In the same play, Fallace steals her romantic dialogue from Greene, and Puntarvolo plays the Arthurian knight in

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<sup>36</sup> In his parallel text edition of *Every Man In*.

<sup>37</sup> R.A. Foakes in his article 'The Descent of Iago: Satire, Ben Jonson, and Shakespeare's *Othello*', in *Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Essays in Comparison*, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann (Manchester: Manchester University Press (Revels), 1986), pp. 16-30, suggests the influence of Jonson's satirical characters and dialogue in *Every Man Out* on Shakespeare.

romance scenarios with his own wife. References to Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays and to *Julius Caesar* can also be traced.

Intertextuality is at a height then in these plays, not only in terms of their reworking of other texts in the Jonsonian canon but also of the texts of other dramatists and authors. Examining their textual instabilities must therefore be a productive way of approaching them as a critic: it reveals the openness and inclusiveness - republicanism? - of Jonson's working commonwealth.

#### V: The Jonsonian stage community

Robert Watson interprets the Jonson comedies in starkly competitive terms: he feels that the dramatist establishes a 'highly modernistic sort of transaction with his characters, in which they vainly compete with him for control of the play . . . .'<sup>38</sup> For him there is no real competition however in the Jonsonian republic, because at base it is an authorial tyranny.

Whilst there is a strong case for considering Jonson's republicanism in a competitive vein, this determination on Watson's part to read all his comic characters as competing playwrights is misleading, not least because it forces both critics and readers to adopt certain unacceptable positions - such as

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<sup>38</sup> Watson, p. 19.

arguing for Doctor/Justice Clement as somehow the controlling figure of *Every Man In(Q and F)* and therefore as a Jonsonian surrogate:

Justice Clement's role in judging this plea, and in presenting and perfecting this new sort of play fits well with the common supposition that he is Jonson's surrogate, a representation of the triumphant playwright upon his own stage.<sup>39</sup>

Clement is a far more ambivalent figure than this interpretation allows; we have already considered in this chapter the paradoxical implications of his Quarto role as *gonfaloniere*. His form of justice is remarkably arbitrary in both versions of the play: that is his obsession and humour:

He is a city magistrate, a justice here, an excellent good lawyer, and a great scholar: but the only mad, merry, old fellow in Europe!

(*Every Man In(F)*, III.ii.251-54)

ED                    They say, he will commit a man, for taking the wall, of his horse.

WELLBRED        Ay, or wearing his cloak of one shoulder, or serving of God: anything indeed, if it come in the way of his humour.

(*Every Man In(F)*, III.ii.258-61)

His clemency appears dubious in the wake of these statements and his decision to incarcerate Cob merely for criticizing tobacco (a royally endorsed opinion by 1616 after all; 1616 was also the year that a Royal Commission pronounced tobacco unfit for public consumption) confirms such doubts.

The doctor/justice's name is as misleading in its operations as Old Kno'well's. Admittedly the Justice's sentencings are less

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

extreme (in both directions) than the *dottore's* but this is not an adequate reason for identifying him directly with some reformed understanding of Jonson, whose opinion of crown officials, which after all included J.P.s (see Chapter Eight), was far from straightforward. It was rather highly tendentious as a section of *Discoveries* reveals: 'The great thieves of a state are lightly the officers of the crown: they hang the less still, play the pikes in the pond, eat whom they list'.<sup>40</sup> Clement must be viewed in juxtaposition with Overdo, Eitherside, Preamble, and the other J.P.s of the Jonsonian canon: to do so immediately establishes a distance between author and character.

If anyone, it is perhaps Musco/Brainworm who represents the creator of *Every Man In(Q and F)*; possibly in his lenient treatment by the Justice we can register a plea for clemency towards comparable creator figures in the real world. This is a strategy I have mapped out elsewhere in the Jonsonian canon - in *Cynthia's Revels* in the relationship between Crites and the ruler of Gargaphy (a thinly veiled representation of Elizabeth I and therefore a reference to Jonson's own position in 1600), through the Ovid-Horace-Virgil triad of *Poetaster*, to the courtroom deposition of the historian Cremutius Cordus in *Sejanus*. A similar

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<sup>40</sup> Donaldson, ll.1320-22; *H & S*, ll.1306-08.

strategy is also in operation in the doubled shape of Asper/Macilente in *Every Man Out*.

Jonson negotiated with comparable figures of patronage and power in his own lifetime. Perhaps it is in the spirit of his being a servant and not a slave that we need to consider his royally commissioned masques. Barish highlights this point when he declares:

The masque . . . represents a society not so much aspiring after as joyfully contemplating its own well-being, the possession of the blessings it considers itself to have achieved. The compliments to the king, so often dismissed as ignoble flattery are one expression of this self-congratulation on the part of the community . . . To eulogize the king is to congratulate the society of which the king is figurehead for the communal virtues symbolized in him. To the extent that the actuality falls short of the ideal, the masque may be taken as a kind of mimetic magic on a sophisticated level, the attempt to secure social health and tranquillity for the realm by miming it in front of its chief figure.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst it is important that we notice here Barish's ideological slippage between the terms "society", "community", and "realm" (terms this thesis is anxious to distinguish), this is an inspired reading of the masque genre, recognizing as it does the role of the community and in a sense the communities of Jonson's plays. There is a need for literary criticism particularly on the reception theme to recognize the potential for some "common ground" with regard to communality between the audiences and performers of masques and those of the public theatres. Jonson in his varied

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<sup>41</sup> Barish, *The Language of Prose Comedy*, p. 244.

theatrical experimentations provided a mirror of the people for the people, and also for the purposes of magistrates and monarchs.

Yet in terms of community there is an overwhelming sense of isolation and separation on the vastly-populated stage of *Every Man Out*. People are constantly talking about themselves, and ostensibly to themselves: the action is a carousel of self-concerns that succeed in deftly avoiding the central realities. The demise of Puntarvolo's dog seems, temporarily at least, to still the circularities of the play's whirling action and discourse and allows for sympathy and understanding to become at least feasible. Perhaps that is the sickest joke of the play - that it takes a catastrophe of sorts to force them to operate halfway successfully as a community. If the absolutist of *Every Man Out*, Macilente, survives intact despite some atrocious behaviour, he is at least exposed to the reinterpretation and judgement of theatre audiences.

The cancelled ending of *Every Man Out* (another revealing instance of textual instability and variance) provides another moment of stillness.<sup>42</sup> Written as it was for initial performance before the reigning monarch, the ending proved subsequently

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<sup>42</sup> cf. Helen M. Ostovich, ' "So Sudden and Strange a Cure": A Rudimentary Masque in *Every Man Out of His Humour*', *ELR*, 22 (1992), 315-32.

problematic in public theatre enactments since they involved a boy actor dressing up as the Queen, a clearly provocative act; yet it does represent an embryonic form of the masque in the Jonsonian canon since Macilente is reformed by the monarch's power and presence. The stage-picture is a highly symbolic and iconized tableau such as would become formulaic in the masques of the early Stuarts.

Reformation is also present in the democratic decision of Cordatus and Mitis to throw responsibility for judging and judgement outwards to a wider audience than their own one onstage. This fashions the idea of the implicit connection between audience and chorus/grex that was so crucial to much Greek drama, tragic or comic, and which was a notion Jonson exploited in one of his Roman tragedies, *Catiline* (1611).

There is insufficient time for Macilente to change back into Asper, to step out of that particular costume, and so Mitis and Cordatus entreat the audience(s) to employ their imaginations (of course we do so in believing in Asper in the first place). Macilente declines to:

doe as Plautus does in his *Amphytrio*, for all this (*Summi Jovis causa, Plaudite*;) begge a *Plaudite*, for god's sake; but if you (out of the bountie of your good liking) will bestow it; why, you may (in time) make leave Macilente as fat, as Sir John Falstaffe.

(*Every Man Out*, V.xi. Grex, ll.82-87)



The audience can in its applause alter things - the outcome of the play, itself, society. Jonson was to re-employ this format in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* and it demonstrates an optimism of the will on his part, an implicit belief in the reformatory and restorative power of the theatre, for all his illusion-breaking strategies and techniques. The second half of Gramsci's formulation (pessimism of the spirit) can fruitfully be used to illuminate Jonson's understanding of how republics work - that all governments tend to the state of oligarchy: *Catiline* also bears witness to that. However, in the communal experience of theatre lies the foundation of community and activity for the common good: that is the body politic, the republican constitution of the stage.

CHAPTER THREE: *POETASTER, SEJANUS, CYNTHIA'S REVELS,*  
AND THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

I: Did Jonson feel the anxiety of influence?: Jonson, Horace, and misprision

Jonson's theory of poetic imitation is clearly set forth in

*Discoveries*: 'The third requisite in our poet or maker is imitation, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use.'<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve this, he says, a writer ought:

To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the principal. Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in crude, raw, or indigested, but that feeds an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment.<sup>2</sup>

Jonson's most obvious literary role model, as Katherine Eisaman Maus has evidenced,<sup>3</sup> was Horace, but the appropriation of Horatian ideas and style was not an untroubled process for Jonson. Much of Harold Bloom's anxiety thesis is expressed in overtly

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<sup>1</sup> *Discoveries*, Donaldson, ll.2490-92; *H & S* VIII, ll.2466-69.

<sup>2</sup> *Discoveries*, Donaldson, ll.2492-98; *H & S* VIII, ll.2469-75.

<sup>3</sup> Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton: University Press, 1984). Douglas Duncan makes a valid case for the influence of Lucan and Erasmus on Jonson in *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). On Marlovian influence on Jonson, see James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights*.

oedipal terminology and vocabulary;<sup>4</sup> he seeks in poetic history, he declares, the 'Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads. . . .'<sup>5</sup>

Jonson's preferred metaphor for the writing/borrowing process was that of a bee sucking nectar from flowers and producing honey; this was once again a "borrowed" term, Platonic in origin. Such an image seems more in accordance with the initial Senecan-derived quote (Epistle 84) from *Discoveries* since it is a digestive one, concerned with the production of the literary substance into something more nourishing.

If, as outlined in *Discoveries*, a writer ought to select a paradigmatic literary figure to emulate in his/her work, then admiration is a driving force in Jonson's imitations and representations of Horace. Yet Jonson also employs the metaphors of patriarchy in discussing matters of influence:

Greatness of name in the father oft-times helps not forth, but overwhelms the sons; they stand too near one another. The shadow kills the growth; so much, that we see the grandchild

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom is essentially concerned with the post-enlightenment era of Romanticism when he felt that creative anxiety became central to the poetic consciousness. Recent work has argued for the re-application of his theories to the early modern period, see in particular Jonathan Bate, 'Ovid and the Sonnets: or Did Shakespeare Feel the Anxiety of Influence?', *ShS*, 42 (1990), 65-76.

<sup>5</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 11.

come more and oftener to be heir of the first, than doth the second. He dies between; the possession is the third's.<sup>6</sup>

The father-son line of influence was clearly problematic for Jonson, whose father had died before he was born; as Riggs's psychoanalytical biography has indicated, this absent father was a constant stress in Jonson's life and work. It is not true to suggest, as Katherine Eisaman Maus does,<sup>7</sup> that father-son/father-daughter relationships are scarcely evident in Jonson's plays; what is true to say is that these familial lines are often ruptured in some way. The Ovid Senior-Ovid Junior conflict which opens *Poetaster* may have a clear source in classical accounts but it is clearly part of a wider pattern of familial conflict which fascinated Jonson throughout his career - from the Lorenzos Senior and Junior of *Every Man In(Q)*, to the revised Kno'wells of *Every Man In(F)*, through to the three Pennyboys of *The Staple of News*.

The writer whose father is included in *Poetaster* is Ovid and not the more obvious choice, for Jonson, of Horace. Horace after

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<sup>6</sup> Donaldson, ll.420-25; *H & S* VIII, ll.413-18. Richard Peterson in *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) suggests that the father-son analogy is 'too narrow to describe the complicated paternity of Jonson's poems.' (p. xv). For a related discussion, see Jonathan Goldberg, 'Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images', in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1986), pp. 3-32, and Debora Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Eisaman Maus, 'The Facts of the Matter: Satiric and Ideal Economies in the Jonsonian Imagination' in Brady and Herendeen, pp. 64-89.



conflicting fashion. Jonson's figuring forth of Horace as his poetic ideal in *Poetaster* still allows for other sides of his nature to be displayed, not least through the blustering bombast of Captain Tucca.<sup>12</sup>

Jonson was never under the arrogant delusion that he was another Horace, no more than he believed that in 1601, with the imminent accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne, society was about to enter another "golden age" like that of Augustus Caesar (a myth that was coming under some contemporary scrutiny anyway). Idealism does colour the portraiture of both Horace and Virgil in this play but, significantly, it is Virgil who ascends the Emperor's throne, and it is he who is the laureate of the artistic community.

Certainly Horace is a moral ideal in *Poetaster*, an image of restraint in a society sliding too easily into decadence and looseness: a fact embodied most provocatively in Ovid's 'banquet of the gods'. Yet it is Horace who defends Ovid against the Emperor's wrath on this occasion and in the light of this we must regard Jonson's judgement of the banquet as something more than mere moral condemnation.

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<sup>12</sup> cf. Tom Hayes, *The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Jonson, Maid Marian, and Robin Hood* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1992). He remarks: 'Jonson's Horatian persona achieved its effects - one of which is to convince us of its authenticity - by constructing the very contradictions Stallybrass and White see his public career as opposing.' (p. 9).

In the wake of criticisms from Marston and Dekker, amongst innumerable others, Jonson felt somewhat akin to the Horace who wrote of being constantly subjected to the envy of others. The short-lived arraignment of Horace in the final act of *Poetaster* painfully figures forth Jonson's own treatment in the scurrilous final act of *Satiromastix*, where just about everything from Jonson's verse to his baldness comes under attack on the public stage. Sara van den Berg has made the useful point that the Horace-Maecenas relationship of poet and patron provided a paradigmatic model of the patronage and protection that Jonson himself sought within the Sidney circle.<sup>13</sup> The country idyll of plenty and self-sufficiency created in 'To Penshurst' is reminiscent of Horace's account of his peaceful Sabine farm, which was a gift to him from Maecenas. The fraught history of Horace's relationship with the ultimate patron and sponsor - Augustus Caesar - is also a factor in Jonson's self-alignment.

In *Poetaster* Horace pinpoints the excesses of the tribune Lupus's treasonous accusations and 'political picklocking', but he is also prepared to risk banishment for the sake of his writing. It is the purposive nature of his writing that separates him and his work, in moral terms at least, from Ovid. Horace writes for the

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<sup>13</sup> Sara van den Berg, *The Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1987), p. 111.

greater good, for the common weal; his work is issued into the aesthetic and political community, whereas Ovid seems driven by personal, and often purely passionate, motives. Significantly, we first view Ovid composing in the relatively insular surroundings of his study, whereas Horace is outdoors in the street, albeit plagued by the unwarranted attentions of Crispinus in the Via Sacra (similar indoors/outdoors distinctions characterize *Volpone*). We are surely then invited to compare all of the writers in this play including the presiding author himself.

## II: Aesthetic communities

That the exotic and amorous myths of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have entered our literary consciousnesses in various revised shapes or forms is already a commonplace of literary study; Jonson was no exception to the rule.<sup>14</sup> *Cynthia's Revels* written a year earlier than *Poetaster*, is set in Ovid's fictional land of Gargaphy and involves varying degrees of transformation. It commences with a quarrel between Cupid and Mercury (Mercury protecting the monarch of the text, Cynthia, from the arrows of love fired from Cupid's bow), and the story of Echo and Narcissus - it is to this

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<sup>14</sup> cf. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). My special thanks to Jon for allowing me to look at sections of this book in advance of publication.



Ovidian tale (*Metamorphoses*, Book III) that the play's subtitle, *The Fountain of Self-Love*, refers, as well as raising more contemporary questions about the narcissistic nature of the late Elizabethan court.<sup>15</sup>

Gargaphy was the place sacred to Diana where Actaeon accidentally gazed on the naked goddess as she bathed only to be turned into a stag and ripped apart by his own hunting hounds. In this play references to Actaeon clearly evoke the memory of the banished Earl of Essex, who was under house arrest in 1600 after invading the Queen's bedchamber. Cynthia's absolutist pronouncement in the wake of Actaeon's crime is thus:

Let mortals learne  
To make religion of offending heaven;  
And not at all to censure powers divine,  
To men, this argument should stand for firme,  
'A Goddess did it, therefore it was good:'  
(*Cynthia's Revels*, V.xi.22-26)<sup>16</sup>

But by 1600 Elizabeth I was visibly far from immortal: she was a decaying emblem of court magnificence, and in *Poetaster* in 1601 Cynthia is dead: the writer Propertius can only mourn her absence. Whether Ben Jonson did the same for Elizabeth I is open

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Orgel has suggested that the myth of Narcissus was a 'paradigm for the Stuart court and the mirror of its theater' in his 'The Role of the King' in *The New Historicism Reader*, ed. by H. Aram Veeser (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 35-45 (p. 35), but Jonson was clearly employing it in Elizabethan times to similar purpose.

<sup>16</sup> The edition of *Cynthia's Revels; or, The Fountain of Self-Love* used throughout is that contained within *H & S IV*, henceforth *Cynthia's Revels*.

to speculation.<sup>17</sup> Relating Jonson's 'narrations of great ones',

William Drummond reported in the *Conversations* that:

Queen Elizabeth never saw herself after she became old in a true glass; they painted her, and sometimes would vermilion her nose. She had always, about Christmas evens, set dice that threw sixes or five (and she knew not they were other) to make her win, and esteem herself fortunate. That she had a *membrana* on her which made her uncapable of man, though for her delight she tried many. At the coming over of Monsieur, there was a French surgeon who took in hand to cut it, yet fear stayed her, and his death. King Philip had intention by dispensation of the Pope to have married her.<sup>18</sup>

The passage serves as an interesting caveat to the work of Anne Barton who has suggested on several occasions that a nostalgia for the Elizabethan era pervades Jonson's late Jacobean and early Caroline texts.<sup>19</sup>

If the tale of painting the old queen's nose red is somewhat apocryphal its spirit is nevertheless representative of a growing dissatisfaction with a dissimulating and disintegrating female monarch at the end of the sixteenth century. Hanna Scolnicov has observed that *Cynthia's Revels* 'gives a picture of a decaying, degenerating *fin de siècle* society which needs a shake-up and

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<sup>17</sup> Jonson certainly wrote no elegy for the dead queen; Blair Worden reflects on this as an implicit example of Jonson's negative appraisal of the late Elizabethan era, along with the positive reception of her successor, in 'Ben Jonson among the Historians', in Sharpe and Lake, pp. 67-89 (p. 84).

<sup>18</sup> Ben Jonson, *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, in Donaldson, *The Oxford Ben Jonson*, p. 602, ll.283-91, henceforth *Conversations*.

<sup>19</sup> See Barton's, 'Harking Back to Elizabeth: Jonson and Caroline Nostalgia', in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, pp. 300-20. Worden, 'Ben Jonson among the Historians', concedes a nostalgia for some ill-defined primitive age but is unconvinced that it is specifically Elizabethan.

points to the sovereign as the one who should intervene.’<sup>20</sup> The play may never directly define itself in *fin de siècle* terms but the turn of the century resounds in its dialogues nevertheless.

Barton and others have spoken of the static nature of this play. There is a sense of waiting for something to happen: in 1600 that something was surely the demise of the Virgin Queen. The new gaze was towards Scotland and James VI and it is perhaps in that northerly direction that Crites articulates himself in *Cynthia’s Revels*. Jonson was himself seeking to establish a position in a constitution which would clearly differ from that which governed the late Elizabethan aesthetic communities.

Jonson’s 1603 play *Sejanus, his Fall* also constitutes a negotiation with the incoming monarch - all the more pressing at this time since Elizabeth was dead and James VI of Scotland was preparing for his coronation as James I of England.<sup>21</sup> In the opening scene of the play the fate of writers in the reign of Tiberius is raised as a salient issue: Cremutius Cordus, a writer of annals (like those of Tacitus, upon which Jonson’s play is ostensibly based), is spotlighted thus. His *Annals* of the time of

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<sup>20</sup> Hanna Scolnicov, *Experiments in Stage Satire: An Analysis of Ben Jonson’s ‘Every Man Out of His Humour’, ‘Cynthia’s Revels’ and ‘Poetaster’* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1987), p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Julie Sanders, ‘“Queasy to be Touched”: Ben Jonson’s Roman Plays and Republican Theory’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, University of Warwick, 1990).

Pompey and Julius Caesar (that is, the time that led to the assassination of Caesar and the installation of a republic by Brutus and Cassius; the subject of Shakespeare’s 1599 *Julius Caesar*) are due to be made public and the other ‘courtiers’ are anxious to trace their relevance to the ‘present state’. Natta (who is later to prove one of Sejanus’s supporters and denounce Cordus in court) enquires:

NATTA	How stands h’affected to the present state? Is he or Drusian? or Germanican? Or ours? or neutral?
LATIARIS	I know him not so far.
NATTA	Those times are somewhat queasy to be touched. ( <i>Sejanus</i> , I.[i].79-82.) <sup>22</sup>

Despite the protestations of others that ‘these our times / Are not the same,’ (*Sejanus*, I.[i].85-86), such concerns lead to Cordus’s trial - this is given prominence in the text at III.[i.] 370. Satrius condemns Cordus as ‘A sower of sedition’ and ‘A turbulent and discontented spirit,’ (*Sejanus*, III.[i].381-82) after his praising of Brutus and Cassius in the *Annals*. Cordus eloquently defends his actions and denies any act of treason. He says that many other writers of note have praised Brutus and Cassius and yet been

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<sup>22</sup> The edition of *Sejanus, his Fall* used throughout is that edited by Philip Ayres for the Revels series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), henceforth *Sejanus*. Ayres has taken the decision not to divide the acts into scenes, unlike the recent Cambridge University Press edition of the play in *Selected Plays of Ben Jonson* I, ed. by Johanna Proctor, henceforth *Selected Plays* I. I have respected Ayres’s decision but for reasons of ease included, henceforth, after all quotations the Cambridge scene divisions (and where relevant alternate line numbers) in brackets within the Ayres numbering and have throughout checked both versions of the play for any significant differences.

tolerated by Caesar, and cites salient examples from the time of Augustus, such as Livy, who praised Pompey so often: ‘As oft Augustus called him a Pompeian - / Yet this not hurt their friendship.’ (*Sejanus*, III.[i.]417-18). Even Julius Caesar tolerated Cicero’s praise of Cato, merely issuing a written objection:

Both bore them and contemned them - I not know  
 Promptly to speak it, whether done with more  
 Temper or wisdom;  
 (*Sejanus*, III.[i.]437-39)

If such writers are Jonson’s exemplars then surely he seeks similar toleration from his presiding ruler - James VI and I. Of course, Jonson goes beyond historical fact to suggest that honours were heaped on such authors: he is clearly seeking a comparable and tenable court position. But the fascination with the fate of writers is crucial. He envies Greek authors who were able to quarrel with each other via the theatrical medium - fighting words with words. *Poetaster* is part of what has become known as the “War of the Theatres”, written expressly for a boys’ company and an example of Jonson bandying words with fellow playwrights, such as Dekker, Marston, and Shakespeare.

The protean Jonsonian relationship with Shakespeare has attracted much critical attention; accounts of the bard’s “influence” on Jonson invariably include mention of the Ovid-Julia balcony

scene in *Poetaster* at IV.vi.<sup>23</sup> The play's central parody is however of the dramatists Thomas Dekker and John Marston as the risible characters respectively of Demetrius Fannius and Crispinus. The battles with Marston and Dekker have been well-documented, although dissenting voices are now being raised which question whether the period can be described in terms of warfare.<sup>24</sup> Certainly within three years of the so-called "War" Jonson was back at the Globe writing *Sejanus* and the entire affair may well have been a convenient means of publicity for the respective boys' companies and the adult theatre with which they were in fierce competition (a state of affairs described by the First Player in *Hamlet*).

Jonson had worked with both the playwrights who were the subject of his scorn in *Poetaster*; admittedly this was a writing procedure the fiercely autonomous Jonson endured rather than enjoyed and may account for the vicious nature of the slanders and backbiting their respective plays contain. Condescension would seem to aptly describe the attitude adopted to Marston (as Crispinus) within the play; his tendency towards hyperbole, and

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<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987). She demonstrates how the Shakespearean ghost is encoded within the works of others, relating this to the debated question of their authorship(s).

<sup>24</sup> David Mann, 'The *Poetaster*, the "War of the Theatres", and the Children', in *The Elizabethan Player* (London: Routledge, 1991).

towards innovative coinages, is mercilessly parodied by Jonson via the character who even describes a street as ‘polite and terse’.

The scenes in which Horace unsuccessfully tries to evade

“Crispinus’s” insistent companionship are extremely funny; Horace complains:

This tyrannie  
Is strange, to take mine eares up by *commission*,  
(Whether I will or no) and make them stalls  
To his lewd *soloecismes*, and worded trash.  
(*Poetaster*, III.i.103-06)<sup>25</sup>

The *pièce de résistance* comes however in the play’s final act when the court, presided over by the golden mean of Horace, issues Crispinus with an enema, causing him to spew back this ‘worded trash’ from his over-stuffed maw - such gems as ‘glibbery’, ‘lubrical’, and ‘snotterie’ are to be found here.

Marston’s prosody is attacked along with his red hair, his legs, and his general demeanour. The satirical presentation of Dekker as the ‘ridiculous’ and horribly popular Fannius is less fleshed-out but full of similar tonalities of condescension.

### III: Republics - fake and genuine

As well as substandard writers such as Crispinus and Fannius

*Poetaster* has a triad of writers who were of importance to the

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<sup>25</sup> The edition of *Poetaster* used throughout is that contained within *H & S IV*, henceforth *Poetaster*.

Early Modern period. All three - Ovid, Horace, and Virgil - were significant in their own way for Jonson. A tendency of the rare critical work produced on *Poetaster* is to select one of the trio to elevate above the others in terms of influence on Jonson's work. The work of Katherine Eisaman Maus has led to an overconcentration on the Jonson-Horace alignment but certainly Horace is crucial to Jonson in terms of republican thinking.

*Poetaster* rarely uses the term 'Emperor' for Augustus.

Augustus himself notably does so in dispelling the banquet:

If you thinke gods but fain'd, and vertue painted,  
Know, we sustaine an actuall residence;  
And, with the title of an Emperour,  
Retaine his spirit, and imperiall power:  
(*Poetaster*, IV.vi.48-51)

and Horace and Tucca repeat the trope in the following scene; otherwise Augustus is Augustus Caesar. The term 'Emperor' is also studiously avoided in *Sejanus*. Jonson, as a classicist of some talent, was well aware that English understandings of the term were a corruption of the Roman term 'Imperator' which meant more specifically 'General'; he was therefore careful to delineate that particular role of Tiberius at the start of *Sejanus*.

Augustus and Tiberius both assumed the style of *Princeps*, a position of rule as Jonson's anglicizing of this as 'Prince' evidences. The rule of princes is undoubtedly the Machiavellian theme of *Sejanus*. The *Princeps* was in theory accountable to the Roman



Senate - a situation which Tiberius makes some play of adhering to, persistently citing his concern for the 'Commonwealth' (the ambiguities of that term were dealt with in the introduction to this paper). Yet as Antony Miller has observed: 'the institutions of imperial Rome are merely shadows of their republican selves. The senators are servile, the title of princeps merely a disguise of the fact that its holder bears monarchical power.'<sup>26</sup> The question of the fake or genuine in terms of the restoration of the republic is crucial. In both of Jonson's Roman tragedies, republicanism is a cloak for the real power structure - often a pyramidal one.<sup>27</sup>

Jonson is as much struck by the political ethos of the Roman republic as by anything else. Augustus claimed in the assumption of the title *Princeps* to be reckoning with the ancient liberties of the republic: he sought a framework of constitutionalism for his actions ('casting the kingdoms old into another mould' as Andrew Marvell was to remark of another republican "ruler", Oliver Cromwell).<sup>28</sup> Augustus was patching over the break; he did not

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<sup>26</sup> Antony Miller, 'The Roman State in *Julius Caesar* and *Sejanus*', in *Jonson and Shakespeare*, ed. by Ian Donaldson (Canberra and London: Macmillan in association with Australian National University, 1983), pp. 179-201 (p. 185).

<sup>27</sup> Worden, 'Ben Jonson among the Historians', stresses that whilst the Roman Empire preserved 'the colours and the forms of republican liberty, [it] had extinguished its substance', p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> Howard Erskine-Hill, in *The Augustan Idea in English Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), proffers a defence of Augustus's careful creation of the particular essence of the *Princeps* as a political necessity in

establish a new monarchy called the Emperorship - *Princeps* simply meant the “leading man” or “first citizen” and carried a sense of accountability.

The fundamental question is whether the Romans of the Augustan age truly believed the republic had been restored; perhaps they did, but only if that meant they understood the terms of its power - that is the need to remain on the right side of Augustus. The latter is clearly an important concern in *Poetaster*: if Ovid and Virgil represent polarized extremes on this matter, then Horace is very much the middle way - perhaps recalling the Jonson of *Cynthia's Revels* who titled himself the ‘servant’ but not the ‘slave’ of the monarchy which that play addressed. Jonson was fascinated by the sense that republicanism seemingly relies on incessant competition - Sejanus and Tiberius, Cicero and Catiline, Volpone and Mosca, and even Ovid, Horace, and Virgil.

Perhaps “pseudo-republicanism” best describes Sejanus’s political ethos. He believes in the operations of the Senate and yet at the same time, in a truly Machiavellian sense, knows that the power of the Senate is only purely apparent. Whether Jonson himself aspired to this pseudo-democracy is a matter for debate: certainly he recognizes in Horace’s delicate negotiation of the

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the wake of the collapse of the triumvirate and the impossibility of successfully restoring the Old Republic. He suggests Octavius as Augustus retained those elements of the old republic that were politically expedient.

middle ground a direct line of influence upon his own socio-political existence.

#### IV: Literary metamorphosis

The anxiety of influence looms large in Jonson's relationship with all three of his classical forebears depicted in *Poetaster*. His literary negotiations with Ovid in that play, as an actual character now, as opposed to a mere supplier of settings or ideas, are part of a wider bargaining process between Jonson and his work and his as yet unfixed notions of the forthcoming political era as well as that of the Augustan past.

The anxiety of influence is physically evident for Ovid when his father enters on to the scene to press him to abandon his (in his father's view) idle love of literature; it is also present for Jonson in terms of his Ovidian inheritance.<sup>29</sup> Maus has written lucidly on this theme, examining Jonson's use of the traditionally polysignificant myths of metamorphosis which were particularly prevalent in Elizabethan comedy:

In the Middle ages and the Renaissance the Ovidian mythological canon became particularly susceptible to a sort of bivalent allegorization. The story of Danaë could suggest both prostitution and the descent of divine grace; the story of

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<sup>29</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, touches on the Jonson-Ovid relationship, with particular reference to *Poetaster*.

Ganymede both homosexual rape and the union of the good soul with God.<sup>30</sup>

In *Catiline, his Conspiracy* (1611) Fulvia's willingness construes the myth of Danaë as a straightforward issue of bribery and prostitution:

I am not taken  
With a cob-swan or a high-mounting bull,  
As foolish Leda and Europa were,  
But with the bright gold, with Danae. For such price  
I would endure a rough, harsh Jupiter  
(*Catiline*, II.i.179-83)<sup>31</sup>

She takes Jove's shower of gold, by means of which he penetrates the tower in which Danaë has been imprisoned by her father, to be a literal bribe against the guards.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist* fashions himself a Jove in his voluptuous dream world, rendering Dol Common his Danaë: she is a prostitute, but he misses in his delusory state the aptness of such a reductive comparison. Maus feels that Jonson follows the Roman moralists' lead by consistently associating metamorphic myths with his more vicious and disreputable characters; Volpone fashions himself a Jove in the attempted rape of Celia, for example:

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<sup>30</sup> Maus, *Roman Frame of Mind*, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> The edition of *Catiline, his Conspiracy* used throughout is that in the Regents Renaissance Drama Series, ed. by W.F. Bolton and Jane F. Gardner (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), henceforth *Catiline*.

<sup>32</sup> Gertrude effects a similarly mercenary reading of the myth in her 'Song of Danae' in *Eastward Ho* (1605), which Jonson co-wrote with George Chapman and John Marston.

Our drink shall be preparèd gold, and amber;  
 Which we will take, until my roof whirl round  
 With the vertigo; and my dwarf shall dance,  
 My eunuch sing, my fool make up the antic.  
 Whilst we, in changèd shapes, act Ovid's tales,  
 Thou, like Europa now, and I like Jove,  
 Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine,  
 So, of the rest, till we have quite run through  
 And wearied all the fables of the gods.

(*Volpone*, III.vii.216-24)<sup>33</sup>

Much of Augustus's anger over the banquet held by Ovid and his clique is aimed at the supposed desecration of the image of the gods (the renewed worship of which had been a keystone in his vision of a "renewed Rome");<sup>34</sup> by dressing up as Jupiter and Juno and bickering in their names, Ovid and Julia reduce the deities to a human level of fallibility - an action tantamount to blasphemy. Virgil's work is singled out by Maus for its refusal to treat the gods thus (something which had after all a respected precedent in Homer); he depicted the gods in generally dignified positions. Ovid's work was, by contrast, regarded as licentious, and certainly the quarrel between Ovid and Julia, articulated here in quite violent terms, reduces the gods to baser levels of sexual jealousies and incontinence. The row is sparked off by Ovid's flirtation with Chloe, something he performs under the protection of his godly disguise, behaving, as he sees it (and again the stress is on Ovid's reading of the myth) like the amorous Jupiter who in

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<sup>33</sup> The edition of *Volpone*, or *the Fox* used throughout is that contained within *Selected Plays I*, henceforth *Volpone*.

<sup>34</sup> See Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*.

Ovid's tales descends to the earth in various animalistic forms and other shapes to seize on women who take his fancy, much to his wife Juno's wrath and despair. Caesar fears that his own powers might be undermined by countenancing such frivolous subversion.

Hanna Scolnicov has produced an excellent exposition of the banquet scene and the fragile stance it maintains between instigating pleasure and political subversion, and indeed dubious morals. Our responses as an audience to the scene are complex and ambivalent. Ovid's banishment is surely not viewed by Jonson as entirely unnecessary although he does allow the lovers some pathos in their parting balcony scene. It is worth pausing to consider whether the "licentious Ovid" is not also a persona formulated by generations of misprision of his work. Jonson's adaptations of the *Amores* interpolated into the speeches of the first act are his versions of the infamous Marlovian translations; the filtering effect of translation should not be underestimated.<sup>35</sup> Also of interest is the fact that the cynicism so often regarded as a Jonsonian import is occasionally present in the Ovidian original. The account of Semele's death is a case in point:

But Semele's mortal frame could not endure the exaltation caused by the heavenly visitant, and she was burned to ashes by her wedding gift. Her child, still not fully formed, was snatched from his mother's womb and *if the tale may be*

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<sup>35</sup> Marlowe's versions had been banned and burned in the 1590s and Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*, suggests Jonson may be bravely challenging authority over this case.

*believed* the feeble baby was sewn into his father's thigh till the months for which his mother should have carried him were fulfilled.<sup>36</sup>

But the selection from the *Amores* made here by Jonson carries its own moral signification since it is one of the few non-erotic elegies. In wishing to win initial audience empathy for Ovid, Jonson is careful not to introduce questions of morality until later in the play's proceedings.

Jonathan Bate is of the opinion that Jonson seeks in *Poetaster* to denounce the previous decade's vogue for Ovidianism - evidenced by the popularity in the 1590s of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Acknowledging that at the beginning of the play Ovid 'seems to represent true poetry,'<sup>37</sup> Bate feels that Ovid subsequently 'goes wrong' 'by following the path of love - by celebrating sexual desire and not the *civis*.'<sup>38</sup> We have already considered the "good citizenship" of Horace as central to an understanding of his work in the context of this play; Ovid could therefore be seen as Horace's literary and moral antithesis.

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<sup>36</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1989), III. Italics my own, p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

The banquet of the gods certainly transports such moral questions to the forefront of audience consciousness: this is undoubtedly the most frivolous form of imitation, reducing theology to issues of fancy dress. Ovid also abuses his Jupiterian costume in order to subvert social hierarchies (as he has in essence been doing all along in his relationship with the ruler's daughter Julia).<sup>39</sup> As Ovid, he is her inferior, as Jupiter he is superior, and he therefore seizes the opportunity to assert an insulting brand of male dominance over her (insulting both to her and her father). This kind of male dominance can be traced in Ovid's texts, where women are repeatedly the foci and victims of male sexuality. Yet Ovid is also the author of the *Heroides*, letters written from the perspective of rejected women; this could simply be seen as a male writer finding the victimized woman a fruitful theme and Maus may see it as a peculiarly Horatian approach to stress Europa's grief but her pain is also evident in Ovid's lines. In Ovidian terms, Jupiter surely does abandon 'the dignity of his sceptre' in assuming the shape of a bull merely to seduce her, and very possibly in doing so he forgoes the right to any fully reverential treatment by writers:

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<sup>39</sup> Of course a famous misconstruance of history. The reasons for Ovid's "relegation" from Rome (it was not an official exile) are unclear but in the same year Augustus banished his own granddaughter Julia (his daughter bore the same name) for an apparent scandal which Ovid may have made reference to in his work, hence the connection in popular imagination.



The girl was sorely frightened, and looked back at the sands behind her, from which she had been carried away. Her right hand grasped the bull's horn, the other rested on his back, and her fluttering garments floated in the breeze.<sup>40</sup>

There is an undoubted beauty in this description and an unavoidable sensuality, but the brutal fact throughout the repetitious structure of the *Metamorphoses* is rape, and it is to Jonson's credit as a reader of Ovid that he never loses sight of this. The ill-treatment of the deities at the banquet can be interpreted as symbolic of the patriarchal abuse at large in this decadent and male-dominated society: this can be viewed in operation in the public abuse of Julia by both her father and her lover. Discounting the continually attempted seductions of Chloe - she is after all the dominant factor in Crispinus's decision to become a writer, another case of personal rather than publicly-derived motives - it is a salutary fact that the single revered woman in *Poetaster* is Cynthia and she is no longer a source or site of revelry since she is dead. Propertius's deifying of her in verse is not nostalgia but simply another convenient literary trope, as Jonson recognizes.

Bate's reading of the Jonsonian rejection of "Ovidianism" in this play produces a conveniently neat series of divisions:

Jonson collapses the whole history of Augustan poetry into a single action. Once Ovid is exiled, Virgil is brought on as an

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<sup>40</sup> *Metamorphoses*, II. p. 73.

example of the true poet who practises decorum and celebrates piety, honour, and the best traditions of Rome.<sup>41</sup>

Bate is himself in danger of collapsing Jonsonian complexity into a single reading in his search for the play's 'true poet'; in doing so, his reading necessarily suppresses, almost into non-existence, the figure of Horace, reducing him to a mere adjunct of Virgil. Bate is admittedly wary of his own yearning to read Virgil as a figuration of George Chapman,<sup>42</sup> Jonson as Horace, and Shakespeare as present, if not omnipresent, in the characterization of Ovid, yet he does regard the rejection of Ovid as absolute in the text: 'That rejection is at once moral, political, and aesthetic. . . .'<sup>43</sup> This seemingly blinds him to the nuanced representation of Virgil in the text.

If Virgil preserves the dignity of the gods in his writings, there remains an underlying darker side to his reading from the *Aeneid* at the court of Augustus. The tale of Dido and Aeneas is also one of transgressive love, symbolized by the storm that rages outside their womb-like cave shelter. This undoubtedly has a reflexive element in terms of Ovid and Julia's partnership, and can

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<sup>41</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 168.

<sup>42</sup> George Chapman had not only written a moralistic completion to *Hero and Leander*, unfinished at the time of Marlowe's death, but had also written a rather cold-blooded poem entitled 'Ovid's Banquet of Sense'.

<sup>43</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 170.

be seen as a contained form of judgement performed upon their relationship by Jonson. Bate regards this passage as unproblematic because Aeneas rejects erotic love in favour of political destiny - as Ovid should have - but surely if we have detected a Horatian line of sympathy for female victims in all the writers involved, then we will also be focused on Dido's plight at this specific moment?

Too many critiques of *Poetaster* have seen the play in purely spiteful terms or have concentrated solely on the Jonson-Horace parallels: they have declined to notice those elements of the Jonson character also present in Ovid, Tucca, and even Virgil. Virgil is the poet laureate to Augustus; this was the role Jonson would himself adopt at the Jacobean court: his aspirations can therefore be seen as figured forth here. Virgil ascends the throne: Jonson will place himself next to the King at dinner in 'To Penshurst'. Even if notions of Chapman are recorded in the figure of Virgil as Bate suggests, it is important to recall that Chapman was himself vying for the literary patronage of the incoming monarch in 1601 and that he held no surer political footing than Jonson following his close identification with the Essex group; the reception of his works at court was as crucial for him as it was for Jonson - and as dangerous and open to the insinuations of others.

Virgil, too, could be called to trial and in some respects this is the judicial nature of the Dido-Aeneas reading.

Writing on Truewit's ambivalent function in *Epicoene*, W. David Kay has remarked on the oddity of Truewit's seemingly antithetical citations of writers as far apart in morality and attitude as Ovid and Juvenal.<sup>44</sup> Truewit is affecting both a frivolous and a sententious strain in his words, which has rendered it impossible for the more moralistic Jonsonian critic to pin him down successfully. These ambivalences exist for Jonson in his own readings within the republic of letters and are a crucial element in his assimilation and appropriation of vastly contrasting classical authors. Whilst Dekker and Marston would seize on the arrogance of the Horatian comparison, *Poetaster* attests to a more all-encompassing self-opinion on Jonson's behalf, both of himself and his classical inheritance. The tracks in the snow that Dryden would trace in his work some decades later<sup>45</sup> are evidence of a plurality of approach that allows for the unusual and difficult blend of leniency and criticism that threads through *Poetaster*. This finds its apogee in the central banquet scene and the multiplicity of response it elicits.

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<sup>44</sup> W. David Kay, 'Jonson's Urbane Gallants: Humanistic Contexts for *Epicoene*', in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 39 (1975-76), 251-66.

<sup>45</sup> See Dryden, 'Of Dramatic Poesy'.

V: Casting the kingdoms old: the Augustan reign of the Stuarts

Jonson apparently enjoyed a positive working relationship with James VI and I, a relationship that provided him with the temporal and fiscal means to write; this happy condition was possibly what he was attempting to inspire when he wrote *Poetaster*. As in *Sejanus*, at *Poetaster*'s core there is a stated plea for a ruler's tolerance towards, and sponsorship of, the arts.

By selecting the Augustan era of Roman history, Jonson is providing the obvious exemplar of a Roman ruler under whom the arts flourished, although he takes pains to deny any direct parallel with the present age, mocking such readings via Envy's prologue:

The Scene is, ha!  
 'ROME? ROME? and ROME?' Cracke ey-strings, and your balles  
 Drop into earth; let me be ever blind.  
 I am prevented; all my hopes are crost,  
 Checkt, and abated; fie, a freezing sweate  
 Flowes forth at all my pores, my entrailes burne;  
 What should I doe? 'ROME? ROME?' O my vext soule,  
 How might I force this to the present state?  
 (*Poetaster*, Prologue, After the second sounding, ll.27-34)

In the address to the reader at the end of the play (another typical act of Jonsonian containment of the text within the materialities of its own composition), Jonson declares that he chose Augustan Rome as his setting not to effect any direct analogy with the 'present state' but because it was a period when 'wit, and arts were at their height in Rome' (l.90). Nevertheless

the local readings possible should not be discounted, nor should praise of the Augustan era be taken on face value.

In *Poetaster*, Augustus is also depicted as being obstructive towards the arts, in the respect that he breaks up the ‘banquet of the gods’. He asserts his power over Ovid’s company in the wake of what he regards as a challenge to the fundamental institutions of Roman life. Despite Horace’s request that he show clemency, Augustus reacts with punitive strength, enacting the ultimate form of censorship on Ovid’s work by banishing him. This is a difficult scene and a difficult response. Our immediate reaction is to feel that Augustus has completely over-reacted against a relatively harmless piece of fun, spurred on by Lupus’s accusations and his personal paranoia; but this is a religious society, pagan or otherwise, and therefore the essence of the banquet is not devoid of blame. The violence that simmers underneath Ovid and Julia’s bickering and the mythological underlay of rape is in a sense what Augustus is responding to - he seeks to protect both his daughter and his rule, responding albeit with Draconian measures and the ‘iron doors of patronage’.

We should not perhaps be so surprised by this more shaded presentation of Augustus; this paradoxical image is contained in many of the central works of classical literature, including

Suetonius and Tacitus to which Jonson clearly had access.<sup>46</sup>

Augustus it was who, after all, ended the democratic dreams of the republic with his installation of the principate and this was accompanied by an absolutist rule which necessarily restricted civil liberties: 'Whatever excellencies in Arms and Arts the absolutism of the Augustan age achieved, the loss of civil liberty and the seeds of ultimate degeneracy were its inescapable concomitants.'<sup>47</sup> Jonson would depict that 'ultimate degeneracy' via the figures of Tiberius and Caligula in *Sejanus*.

If Ovid's banquet is an outward sign of the slippage of society into looseness and dubious morality, then Virgil's reading from his newly-composed *Aeneid* supposedly marks the admirable social occasion. Read for Augustus, it is a text aimed at educating and improving society with its tales of heroism and political courage; this all fits Horatian and indeed Jonsonian notions of the worth of literature in a social context. But the surface here is also deceptive since, as we have already remarked, storms and emotional turbulence are the underside of Virgil's text. In addition, this "public" reading is essentially an elitist gathering,

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<sup>46</sup> Malcolm Kelsall, 'Augustus and Pope', in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 39 (1975-76), 117-31. See also Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*. Erskine-Hill seems convinced that Jonson manipulated these sources to present a more idealized version of Augustus as patron-ruler, but I feel the paradoxes are retained and shade any theatrical reception of the character.

<sup>47</sup> Kelsall, p. 118.

performed behind closed doors - a democratic gesture for the select few.

Similar ambiguities must have existed for Jonson under James, his sometimes supporter, sometimes prosecutor. The fine line between satire and libel was a tightrope he often chose to walk and the falls were numerous. The more positive Augustan myth of the 'golden age', of Astraea's return and the establishment of peace on earth was certainly one harnessed by James as it had been by Elizabeth I before him. James may well therefore have encouraged analogies to be drawn between himself and Augustus, certainly in terms of a clement rule and a tolerant patronage of the Arts. Leah Marcus has made a case for an understanding of James as a lenient receiver of critique:

In theory, the Stuarts were indeed inflexible as to the political functioning of art. In practice . . . they allowed considerably more latitude and not merely by default or out of some sleepy incapacity to perceive what their supposed panegyrists were up to. The Stuart kings accepted, or at least tolerated, perhaps even on occasion encouraged, an art as much revisionary as normative.<sup>48</sup>

Marcus has also recounted in some detail how Charles I's accession sounded a very different political and performative note, alienating him from the pastimes and theatrical

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<sup>48</sup> Leah Marcus, 'Masquing Occasions and Masque Structure', in *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 24 (1981), 7-16 (p. 9).



experimentation that his father had countenanced.<sup>49</sup> Jonson's first play of the new reign, *The Staple of News* (1626), all too clearly delineates the declining popularity of the late king's court-poet under this new rather distanced monarchy. For Charles the anxieties produced during his reign were to prove very real and uncontained as England plunged into the civil wars. The ambiguous tones of Horace were to sound again in the seventeenth century but no longer from the now dead Ben Jonson, but instead from the metaphysical verse of Andrew Marvell. His Horatian Ode is ostensibly a celebration of Oliver Cromwell's victorious return from Ireland.<sup>50</sup> The darker side is however omnipresent if we recall that whilst there Cromwell had committed his own absolutist atrocity in the massacre of the Irish peasantry at Drogheda. The real actor in this poem is Charles himself. Some time earlier his own father had expressed some concern about the influence of terminology when in the *Basilikon Doron* (a text of paternal advice written for the equally ill-fated Prince Henry, who died tragically young, and with him a great

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<sup>49</sup> Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defence of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> See David Norbrook, 'Marvell's "Horatian Ode" and the Politics of Genre', in *Literature and the English Civil War*, ed. by Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 143-69. Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*, convincingly shows how the depiction of Cromwell in this poem itself has links to the Augustan poetic tradition.

deal of the optimism surrounding the Stuart accession) he substituted the word 'stage' for 'scaffold'; it was a telling instance of semantic slippage and an example of the anxiety of influence to which Marvell would famously return.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ALTERNATIVE COMMONWEALTH OF WOMEN:  
JONSON AND SEXUAL POLITICS

Theatre and dressing-up travel hand-in-hand; anti-theatrical tracts of the early modern period frequently slipped into anti-female polemic.<sup>1</sup> Comparable critical elisions have occurred where Jonson is concerned; those who label him as anti-theatrical invariably also label him a misogynist and an absolutist; a certain playfulness needs to be accorded his attitudes in both respects. The problems of sexuality and appearance were highlighted by the use of boy actors to perform female roles in the early modern period and these problems were further exacerbated by the boys' companies for whom Jonson wrote a number of specially commissioned plays.

*Epicoene; or, The Silent Woman* (1609) is one of those boys' company texts and is closely bound up with the problematic operations of boy actors. The opening scene of the play is fraught with suggestions of transvestism and homosexuality. The *pièce de résistance* comes, however, with the removal of the peruke in Act V; the act constitutes the antithesis of so-called "hair-revelation" scenes which Simon Shepherd has seen as so intrinsic to texts such

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean E. Howard, 'Renaissance Antitheatricality and the Politics of Gender and Rank in *Much Ado About Nothing*', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. by Jean E. Howard and Marian F. O'Connor (London and New York: Methuen, 1987; repr. 1990), pp. 163-87.

as Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>2</sup> Jonson is clearly playing with traditional concepts and representations of women in literature; misogyny becomes a rather rash accusation as a consequence since there does seem to have been room for women in Jonson's theatrical republic - in such plays as *The Alchemist*, *The Devil is an Ass*, and most of the later Caroline texts there are important and influential female characters (Prudence and Lady Frances, Laetitia, and the Nurse in *The New Inn*, Lady Loadstone and the she-parasite Polish amongst others in *The Magnetic Lady*,<sup>3</sup> Audrey in *A Tale of a Tub*, Maudlin and Marian, Douce, and Earine in *The Sad Shepherd*).

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warriors: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Helen Ostovich, in a recent article, 'The Appropriation of Pleasure in *The Magnetic Lady*', *SEL*, 34 (1994), 425-42, has argued that Jonson shows little regard for female agency or intelligence in this particular late play, in marked contrast to *The New Inn* or *The Devil is an Ass*. She cites the negative agency of Polish, Keep, and the female "conspirators" over Placentia's pregnancy, and also the passivity of the two changeling daughters in the text, in support of this theory (comparing them in that to Pecunia in *The Staple of News*, a notion I hope to disprove in the course of this chapter); she also suggests that Lady Loadstone shows a lack of acumen either in her choice of friends or suitors to her niece (Compass is the obvious exception but Ostovich stresses he is a friend of her late husband). Ostovich has a point in that the two fourteen year olds are scantily drawn in dramatic terms in this highly populated play, but male conspiracies seem equally abound, what with Interest's guarding of his niece's inheritance, and Parson Palate's advances in favour of whoever pays best, and the various selfish suitors. I see the play in less directly misogynistic terms.

Plato's *Republic* notoriously banished poets and accorded equality to women;<sup>4</sup> it claimed that gender differentiation was valid only in the area of sexual reproduction and therefore allowed women equal access to education and occupations. That said, Plato's text, in abolishing the family and establishing state nurseries in order to free women to pursue these newly-allowed occupations, decrees that women and children be 'held in common', scarcely the edict of a proto-feminist.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, in *The Devil is an Ass* (1616), Lady Tailbush and Lady Eitherside (a later variation on the autonomous Ladies' Collegiate of *Epicoene*) claim familiarity with the Platonic precedent. Lady Tailbush, the female monopolist of this play, possesses a markedly politicized discourse as well as ambition:

LADY TAILBUSH	If I can do my sex by 'em any service
	I've my ends, madam.
WITTIPOL	And they are noble ones,

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, ed. and trans. by Desmond Lee, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974; repr. 1987). The banishment of poets is in truth a belated and small part of the whole.

<sup>5</sup> See part six of the Penguin translation, p. 236. Plato's sense of female participation is strongly related to the myth of Sparta that was a potent one in contemporary Athens, namely that women took an active role in military and athletic preparations, and did so naked like the men; the sexually voyeuristic undertones of this 'liberation' of women should not therefore be underestimated.



numerous stage-worlds, be they liberated or oppressed figures, residing in commonwealths or patriarchies, and to politicize their import.

I: 'Content to learn in silence'

In a sermon, John Donne declared that woman 'must not governe' but must instead 'be content to learn in silence with all subjection';<sup>8</sup> this is how he glosses woman's inferiority to man. His emphasis is always on duty and obedience; he regards the primary relation as that of Prince to subject and the secondary and tertiary as those of husband to wife (the order is significant) and parent to child. For him the love of a husband is unashamedly a form of political control and he views the relationship of the sexes as necessarily entailing submission and consent on the female side.

Embodied in Donne's texts are conventional notions of the supreme female grace being silence. The antithesis of this is to be labelled socially as a "shrew". *Epicoene's* subtitle, *The Silent Woman*, has led many to accuse Jonson of similarly false expectations of women but this is a consequence of a critical

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<sup>8</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-1962), 11:17:347-48.

refusal to look more closely at the operations of that particular play. For the silent woman is no woman at all, but indeed a man, and is rarely silent; Morose's dream of a perfectly "dumb" wife is therefore exposed as false.

It would be wrong to associate Jonson with the stereotypes of women endorsed by a number of his characters. It is valuable to consider exactly who voices these conventional "wisdoms"; characters who openly desiderate female silence are Volpone, Sir Epicure Mammon, and Fabian Fitzdottrel; admittedly Volpone does so in hilarious and pained response to Lady Would-be's attempts at verbal seduction but the view accrues darker significance when he attempts to rape Celia. Fitzdottrel's selfish swearing of his wife to silence throughout her interviews with Wittipol forces the gallant to 'play her role' as well, speaking her lines for her. This is a witty parody indeed of male dramatic constructions of femininity - an issue that had even greater impact in the original performances since Wittipol was played by Dick Robinson, a former boy actor, who had previously played a number of Jonsonian female roles, most notably in *Epicoene* and *Catiline*. In the source-text, the *Decameron*, this ruse enabled the seducer to voice the unnamed wife's sexual consent;<sup>9</sup> something rather

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<sup>9</sup> The source-text for this section of Jonson's plot is the Fifth story of the Third Day in Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York and London: Norton, 1982).



different occurs here. For all the seductive charm of Wittipol's verse, Frances remains chaste but finds a voice of considerable weight and quality. In speaking for herself, she is able to retrieve access to decision-making processes, for if women are silent men are free to interpret their desires as they wish.

Puritanism affected the issue of female representation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Puritan sects boasted considerable female membership; meetings and lectures offered women a context for existence outside of the household, expanding as it were their political threshold. They admitted women on equal terms and even allowed them to minister and to have a say in the government of the sect. This then provided an area in which women might temporarily be freed from a father or husband's control. The female collegiate of *Epicoene*, an 'alternative commonwealth' as Mary Beth Rose has so aptly termed it,<sup>11</sup> is a possible analogue to this, or even an extension of the thinking, fashioning as it does a wholly female gathering and decision-process.

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<sup>10</sup> Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (London: Macmillan, 1975), explored the impact of Puritanism upon attitudes towards women. The book has since faced considerable academic opposition and revision, not least at the hands of historicist critics such as Lisa Jardine, see *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, 2nd edn (Brighton: Harvester, 1983). The main thesis however remains a valuable one to work with.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Jonson does register the Puritan contribution to female education but in a somewhat qualified fashion. He has Dol reciting extensively from a controversial Puritan text by Broughton in the scene in *The Alchemist* where she is “playing” a learned lady in order to tempt the eminently persuadable Mammon into some sexual digressions. Editorial glosses tend to cite this as evidence of Jonson’s scorn for the figure of the educated Puritan woman but are in danger of forgetting Dol in all of this. A Blackfriars prostitute she may be but she is clearly able to handle the complicated Broughton text and she makes perhaps the most astute political comments in the play.

The pursuits of the Ladies’ Collegiate in *Epicoene* are similarly quoted as evidence of Jonson’s disapproval of educated, independent women. As Helen Ostovich’s article on group aggression in Jonsonian drama has gone some considerable way to revealing, the truth behind the characterizations of the collegiate’s members is more complex.<sup>12</sup> Offering intriguing anthropological and behavioural explanations for the operations of group aggression amongst the frequently male gatherings of Jonson’s plays (examining the jeerers of *The Staple of News*, the roarers of *Bartholomew Fair*, and the competing males of *The Alchemist* -

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<sup>12</sup> Helen Ostovich, ‘ “Jeered by Confederacy”: Group Aggression in Jonson’s Comedies’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 3 (1986), 115-28.

amongst whom the female voice of Dol acts as pacifier), Ostovich argues that the mock-masculinity of the women's academy is in essence a response to that behaviour: 'their mock-masculine aggressiveness parodies and crystallizes the pettiness of the male groups.'<sup>13</sup> Living apart from their husbands, the women rejoice in the reversal of all kinds of male expectations; they make passes at pages, lure lovers with gifts,<sup>14</sup> and leer at men. In the cruelly competitive society of *Epicoene's* 1609 London, they perform their personalized version of one-upmanship: the patriarchal root of the word almost necessitating this mimetic style of group aggression. That is not to say that Jonson condones their actions but merely to suggest that he is considering the socio-political implications of the Collegiate rather than expressing personal anxiety about independent women.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> William Flesch has suggested that the renaissance act/ritual of gift-giving was inextricably bound up with Foucauldian notions of power, see *Generosity and the Limits of Authority: Shakespeare, Herbert, Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Critics, such as Mary Beth Rose in *The Expense of Spirit*, have tended to stress the personal anxiety theme. She establishes a rather odd opposition between the 'extreme conservatism' of Jonson's text and the proto-feminism of Dekker and Heywood's, *The Roaring Girl* (c.1611). I would suggest that the latter play's stress on the sheer uniqueness of Moll the female protagonist's personality, and the juxtaposed existence of the more traditional, and therefore marriageable, heroine in the shape of Mary Fitzallard, is as conservative as anything Rose chooses to highlight in *Epicoene*. Moll's individuality annuls any real sense of social threat whereas by contrast the group operations of the Ladies' Collegiate are potentially more lastingly subversive.

Mistresses Haughty, Centaur, and Trusty - the Academy members - are not actually seen until Act III, but the verbal build-up to their noisy entrance is considerable. Truewit describes and decries:

A new foundation, sir, here i'the town, of ladies, that call themselves the Collegiates, an order between courtiers, and country madams, that live from their husbands; and give entertainment to all the Wits, and Braveries o'the time, as they call 'em; cry down, or up, what they like, or dislike in a brain, or a fashion, with most masculine, or rather hermaphroditical authority: and, every day, gain to their college some new probationer.

(*Epicoene*, I.i.84-92)<sup>16</sup>

The Collegiate is ultimately silenced by the sexual revelations of the final act but their sentence is certainly less harsh than Morose's. *Epicoene* infiltrated their ranks but not without some exhibition of sympathy. Competition over Dauphine - a female form of acquisition in the world of nascent capitalism - has temporarily split their ranks but the need for female solidarity persists.

## II: The patronage of women / Patronizing women

In his depiction of the female Collegiate as free-thinking, self-financing, aristocratic women, Jonson was treading the dangerous line between humour and potentially offensive satire of his own

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<sup>16</sup> The edition of *Epicoene*; or, *The Silent Woman* used throughout is that contained within *Selected Plays* I, henceforth *Epicoene*.

eminent female patrons, amongst them Lucy, Countess of Bedford; Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland (Sir Philip Sidney's daughter); her cousin Lady Mary Wroth (daughter of Sir Robert Sidney, owner of Penshurst); and even Queen Anne herself. None of these women appear to have taken actual offence although Lady Arabella Stuart noted a supposed self-reference and sought to have the play censored. The Countesses and Lady Mary Wroth all participated as dancers in subsequent Jonsonian court masques and both the Countess of Rutland and Wroth were themselves poets.<sup>17</sup> Jonson expressed much admiration for their work; he is recorded in the *Conversations* as being of the view that the Countess of Rutland 'was nothing inferior to her father . . . in poesy' (*Conversations*, ll.172-73), and in one of several striking poems he wrote in praise of Wroth, he declares that:

I, that have been a lover, and could not show it,  
Though not in these, in rhymes not wholly dumb,

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<sup>17</sup> Feminist academics have done much to recuperate the canon of women's writing at this time, see, for example, *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse*, ed. by Germaine Greer and others (London: Virago, 1988). On Mary Wroth's work in particular, see Helen Hackett, ' "Yet Tell Me Some Such Fiction": Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* and the "Femininity" of Romance', in *Women, Texts, and Histories, 1575-1760*, ed. by Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 39-68; and Kim F. Hall, ' "I Rather Would Wish to be a Black-Moor": Beauty, Race, and Rank in Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania*', in *Women, "Race", and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 178-94. Hackett points out that in criticizing the *Urania* for its allusions to his own family Edward Denny accused Wroth of hermaphroditism. This was then a common attack on educated women.

Since I exscribe your sonnets am become  
 A better lover, and much better poet.  
 (*Underwood*, 28, 1-4)<sup>18</sup>

In Wroth and others Jonson had prime exemplars of well-read women and of astute theatre-goers; Jonson dedicated his ultimate work of metatheatre, *The Alchemist*, to Wroth. Michael Shapiro has written an account of her use of the theatrical metaphor in her prose and relates this to her extensive experience of court-performances in 1603-04, and 1608-09, when she may have seen or heard of up to forty plays.<sup>19</sup> Jonson chose to make his onstage female audience in *The Staple of News* astute spectators and his judgement of female taste and intelligence cannot therefore be easily dismissed.

*Epicoene* was written in 1609 when the assertive gestures at court of the Catholic Queen of England and Scotland, Anne of Denmark, were particularly prevalent; she was fostering her own

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<sup>18</sup> In his recent anthology of Renaissance verse David Norbrook admirably elected to include extensive extracts from Wroth's work. The verses indicate her complicated love-life. See *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse, 1509-1659*, ed. by David Norbrook and H.R. Woudhuysen (London: Penguin, 1992). She was in love with William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke by whom she would bear two children after her husband's death. An articulate and lettered woman effectively silenced by the traditional process of arranged marriage, she must have presented a poignant image for Jonson:

In this strang labourinth, how shall I turne?  
 wayes are on all sides, while the way I miss:  
 if to the right hand, ther, in love I burne;  
 lett mee go forward, therin danger is; . . .  
 yett that which most my troubled sense doth move  
 is to leave all, and take the thread of love.

(*Pamphilia*, 'A Crown of Sonnets . . .' l.1-4, 13-14).

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Shapiro, 'Lady Mary Wroth Describes a "Boy Actress"', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 4 (1989), 187-93.

household and style. Jonson had first written for Anne in 1605 when he won the coveted Twelfth Night masque commission. The resultant *Masque of Blackness*, with its twelve African daughters of Niger, danced by the Queen and her ladies, has been read by many scholars as an act of female aggression in the male-dominated Jacobean court.<sup>20</sup> Riggs sees the masque's content as a direct challenge being issued by the Queen against her husband's absolutist authority: 'the surface impression of license that inhered in the ladies' dark complexions was just as compelling as the King's power to whiten and cleanse.'<sup>21</sup>

A number of critics have connected *Epicoene* with the 1605-06 masque *Hymenaei* which Jonson composed to commemorate the wedding of the young Lady Frances Howard.<sup>22</sup> Jonson's relationship with the Howard family had been fraught up to this

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Orgel describes it as 'providing a martial context for womanly virtue', see his 'The Role of the King', p. 36. Lynda E. Boose remarks that 'one can only guess at the extent to which the subversiveness of this performance was intentional' in ' "The Getting of a Lawful Race": Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman', in Hendricks and Parker, pp. 35-54 (p. 51). See also Kim F. Hall, 'Sexual Politics and Cultural Identity in *The Masque of Blackness*', in *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (Iowa City: University of Press, 1991), pp. 3-18.

<sup>21</sup> Riggs, p. 119. He even goes so far as to suggest (in a not entirely convincing thesis) that the Queen's personal antagonism towards the King may have influenced the scandalous references to the Scottish favourites in *Eastward Ho* for which Jonson and his fellow playwrights Marston and Chapman were temporarily imprisoned. The play was performed by the controversial Children of the Queen's Revels.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Dutton has a chapter on the play and the masques in *Ben Jonson: To the First Folio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). I am also indebted to Jeremy Maule for discussion of these themes.

point and he may well have accepted the commission for political motives; the text combines themes of marital and political union. Ironically Jonson would be recommissioned to write the masque for Frances's second marriage. The first was annulled on the grounds of the groom's supposed impotence; the second would lead to scandal and accusations of murder.

Insistent in the printed text of *Hymenaei* is the idea of the coming together of disparate entities to form a coherent whole; the familiar Jonsonian trope of circles figures heavily, culminating in the 'one strong knot' of the bridal girdle. In *Epicoene* the circles are undone, the harmony reduced to a cacophony. The ending itself is an untying: Morose is 'undone'. The only form of knot mentioned in the play is that of Tacitus's writings but even then this is referred to as 'an entire knot: sometimes worth the untying, very seldom.' (*Epicoene*, II.iii.64-65).

The language of *Epicoene* functions on negatives and nothings - with the familiar Renaissance pun on female genitalia, truly "nothing" in the case of *Epicoene*. There are manifold cries of 'O!'. Haughty and her cohorts arrive as a veritable antimasque, revelling in the comedy of Morose's marriage to a 'silent' wife and reflecting on how all the crucial aspects of a wedding, such as a masque like *Hymenaei*, are missing:



We see no ensigns of a wedding, here; no character of a bride-ale: . . . .

(*Epicoene*, III.vi.80-81)

No gloves? no garters? no scarves? no epithalamium? no masque?

(*Epicoene*, III.vi.100-01)

The fate of Frances Howard's first marriage might be said to bear out the falsity of sumptuous literary and visual epithalamiums and Riggs argues that Jonson may be wryly commenting on the theatrical illusion his masques were designed to achieve, papering as they do over the cracks, political and personal.

As we have seen, Queen Anne was an important patron for Jonson and although Riggs argues that he came to resent female influence over his fortunes, Jonson never consciously evaded or publicly complained about female patronage. Significantly enough, *Cynthia's Revels* (1600) features an admirable female patron in Lady Arete, who is clearly a pacifying influence on Crites the poet. In 1608 Anne commissioned Jonson to write a sequel to the *Masque of Blackness*, featuring the same twelve African daughters; this became the *Masque of Beauty*: 'The subtext of the performance itself, to judge from the accounts of contemporary male observers, was feminine aggressiveness and masculine docility.'<sup>23</sup> Similar themes and subtexts can be traced

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<sup>23</sup> Riggs, p. 148. Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*, argues that the feminine aggression in masques such as *The Masque of Queens*, where Fame dispels the witches' antimasque, is never totally subsumed despite Jonson's surface capitulation to the King. He suggests that Anne, an ostracized Roman Catholic, may have been a figure of empathy for Jonson the Catholic

in *Epicoene*, not least via the Otter partnership. The patronage network appears to have given Jonson access to female power in a very potent and creative sense.

### III: 'Not to be taken all ways'

Being caught in the middle is a topographically present notion in *Epicoene*; the play deals in, even stands amidst, middles, means, and compromises. Everyone in this play seems to be either retiring from or aspiring to the court, which is noticeably always offstage:

The division of Jonson's works into mutually reinforcing spheres of courtly spectacle and sophisticated burlesque mirrored the geographical polarities of his daily life. His house in St. Anne's, Blackfriars, lay on the western edge of the City of London, while Westminster, the site of his court masques, stood a mile and a half to the west . . . *Epicoene* is set in this middle ground where the upstart bourgeois blends into his mirror image, the jaded courtier. . . Domiciled midway between the city and the court, and busily spending their way up the social ladder, these inhabitants of the emergent "town" are ideally suited to enact a burlesque of the court masque, for they are themselves a tribe of counterfeit courtiers.<sup>24</sup>

This chapter itself adopts an intermediary position. I am not seeking to find comfortable middle ground for Jonson, to balance as it were misogyny with feminism, but instead to see how in his plays contrasting strategies are consistently played off

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convert. He also traces similar themes of female power and the undermining of the court's phallocentrism through the canon to Jonson's last, unfinished play, *The Sad Shepherd*.

<sup>24</sup> Riggs, pp. 157-58.

against one another. Perhaps for women characters that is the most liberating and egalitarian act of all.

Middles in the sexual sense carry us towards questions of hermaphroditism and androgyny. The classical source of hermaphroditic theory was both Platonic and Ovidian; both writers are frequently cited in the author-littered text of *Epicoene*. Patrick Cheney has investigated the relevance of Plato's *Symposium* for Jonson's *The New Inn*, since both texts expound the theory that ideal love is the blending of two into one:<sup>25</sup>

Jonson's with Lovel's courtroom speech in Act III:

It is a flame and ardour of the mind,  
Dead in the proper corps, quick in another's:  
Transfers the lover into the loved.  
The he or she that loves, engraves or stamps  
Th'idea of what they love, first in themselves;  
Or, like to glasses, so their minds take in  
The forms of their beloved, and them reflect.  
(*The New Inn*, III.ii.95-101)<sup>26</sup>

I am not trying to extrapolate a case that Jonson argues the ultimate union is an androgynous one and that therefore his politics, republican or otherwise, were open to female participation; nevertheless, in his personal vacillation between the absolutist and democratic positions we can recognize the standpoint of many neo-classical historians, among them

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<sup>25</sup> Patrick Cheney, 'Jonson's *The New Inn* and Plato's Myth of the Hermaphrodite', *RenD*, n.s. 14 (1983), 173-94.

<sup>26</sup> The edition of *The New Inn* used throughout is that ed. by Michael Hattaway for the Revels series (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), henceforth *The New Inn*.

Machiavelli, who argued in favour of an oligarchical republic, a *stato misto* : this is indeed a form of political androgyny.

Where *Epicoene* is concerned, even the nomenclature participates in the merging and blurring of distinctions. An otter is an ‘animal amphibium’ (*Epicoene*, I.iv.29) and the Ladies Collegiate are of ‘hermaphroditical authority’, assuming their husbands’ surnames. In Centaur’s case this too rewrites the classical and mythological model since centaurs were always male; her sexual depravity and the lecherous nature of all the women in this play may constitute the reasoning behind these names but the blurring of absolutes is also significant. That the 1620s pamphlet war between anti-feminists and “feminists”<sup>27</sup> echoes so many of his images and ideas indicates that Jonson is once again capturing society on the cusp of transition.<sup>28</sup> That need not mean as critics that we have to place him on either side of the divide, but rather requires that we see him visibly negotiating the centre.

Hermaphroditical imagery was crucial to alchemical discourse, an analogue Jonson frequently employed for his

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<sup>27</sup> See Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, eds, *Half-Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985). I am a little more wary than Henderson and McManus about the ready application of the term “feminist” to the female-authored defences of women in this period.

<sup>28</sup> Don E. Wayne, ‘Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View’, *RenD*, n.s. 13 (1982), 103-29.

theatrical compositions. An hermaphrodite is present in Volpone's anti-establishment household and the confusion over gender in *Epicoene* is also a recognition of political shifts and transitions. Jonson's female portrayals, which are more complex than the usual brusque dismissal of his "stereotypes" suggests, allow for theatrical individuations that open the way for analogous political realignments. He may have never argued the outright merits of a parliament of women but he nevertheless recognized their necessary and influential role within any commonwealth - feigned or real. To read his representations solely via widespread generalizations is to blur the distinctions signalled by Clerimont's warning to the rapacious Truewit: 'But all women are not to be taken all ways.' (*Epicoene*, IV.i.101).

#### IV: 'O you wives and mothers!'

Those female characters seen onstage in *Sejanus* might seem to be most readily associated with cosmetics and face-painting.

Christopher Ricks sees a homogeneity between this and the themes and imagery of more obviously political scenes in the play.<sup>29</sup> The play involves various de-facements - of statues and

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<sup>29</sup> Christopher Ricks, 'Sejanus and Dismemberment', *MLN*, 76 (1961), 301-08.

personalities. The most shocking counterbalance to Tiberius's defacements and self-effacements is however provided by an unseen woman - Apiciata, Sejanus's wife. On discovering her children's despoiled and ravished corpses she tears her hair and rends her face in anguish.

Apiciata's grief is in many respects symbolic of the fragmentation of the family as a unit in *Sejanus*. The remnants of the imperial family gathered at Agrippina's house are slowly whittled away by the forces of the Emperor and his cold-blooded favourites. Agrippina is denied any real matriarchal power - her calls to virtue are questioned and her calls to vengeance, following the trial and suicide of Silius and the deaths and disappearances of other of her friends, are ignored.

Plot occurrences of this kind have led many critics to feel that there is a distinct lack of families *per se* in Jonson's work, unlike, for example, the family-oriented late plays of Shakespeare. One argument frequently proffered in explanation of the familial emphases of the late Shakespearean texts is the arrival in England in 1604 of a Royal family; the household of James VI and I was in marked contrast to the singular rule of the Virgin Queen. Yet the Jacobean accession inaugurates in the Jonsonian imagination a play where the family is under sentence of death. Riggs makes the point that at the time of *Sejanus*'s composition Jonson had

separated himself from his own family;<sup>30</sup> during this time he received in a letter from his wife Anne notice of the death of their first son, also called Benjamin. The resultant sense of culpability is evident in the poem on that subject, 'On My First Sonne', but possibly also in the contemporaneous play.<sup>31</sup>

Volpone's household in the eponymous 1606 play is a vicious parody of traditional family structures. Frequent articles on the play refer to the Eunuch, Hermaphrodite, and Dwarf, whom Volpone keeps locked up in his Venetian palazzo, as the Fox's "children". Just as Volpone's toying with his "clients" subverts the usual process of inheritance (more generally to be passed down through male generations - something Corbaccio also disrupts in his eagerness to write his natural son Bonario out of his will in favour of the wealthy, and supposedly dying, Volpone), so his household subverts the normal expectations of family. As Volpone declares:

What should I do,  
But cocker up my genius, and live free  
To all delights my fortune calls me to?  
I have no wife, no parent, child, ally,  
To give my substance to; but whom I make,  
Must be my heir :

(Volpone, I.i.70-75)

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<sup>30</sup> See Riggs.

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Scodel, 'Genre and Occasion in Jonson's 'On My First Sonne' ', *Studies in Philology*, 86 (1989), 235-59. For Jonson's far more impersonal treatment of the death of his daughter, see Anne Lauinger, ' "It Makes the Father Lesse to Rue": Resistance to Consolation in Jonson's 'On My First Daughter' ', *Studies in Philology*, 86 (1989), 219-34.

Another possible parody of parent-child relationships is that of Ursula and Mooncalf in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). A valid and valuable question to pose in terms of Jonson's literary commonwealth is who exactly are the wives and daughters he chose to portray and what, if anything, are their assigned roles?

Although as a city in literature Rome is consistently feminized, not least in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* where Martius's relationship with his mother-city is as complex and ripe for analysis as that he shares with Volumnia, in *Catiline* this trope takes on a somewhat inverted and perverse nature. In his image-drenched opening speech, Catiline himself declares:

I will hereafter call her step-dame ever.  
 If she can lose her nature, I can lose  
 My piety, and in her stony entrails  
 Dig me a seat where I will live again  
 The labor of her womb, and be a burden  
 Weightier than all the prodigies and monsters  
 That she hath teem'd with since she first knew Mars.  
(*Catiline*, I.i.91-97)

This seeming inversion of the natural course and direction of parturition is echoed in the sinister commencement of the Cary-Morison Ode (c.1630), where a baby, witnessing upon its birth Hannibal's razing of its hometown, reverts to the womb for safety from the evils of the world.

The literary notion of the perversion or corruption of motherhood is present in the mythical origins of Rome as a city: Romulus and Remus, the fratricidal twins, are nurtured by a she-



wolf. The use of matriarchal imagery in *Catiline* is frequently telling. Elsewhere in the Jonsonian canon fathers hold sway; we hear Ovid Senior railing against his son's chosen profession in *Poetaster*, and the three Pennyboys in *The Staple of News* are the driving force of the plot there. Audrey in *A Tale of a Tub* declines proposals of marriage in accordance with her father's wishes with little consideration for her own feelings on the matter; in fact, so stifled are her emotions that the play consistently hints at her sexual frigidity.

V: Less rueful fathers?: Male readings and female victims

Fathers and uncles are dominant in Jonson's plays: think of Pennyboy Senior (in *The Staple of News*) or Justice Overdo (in *Bartholomew Fair*) with their respective female wards, Princess Pecunia and Grace Wellborn. Overdo, with barely-concealed mercenary intentions, plans to marry Grace, however unwillingly, to his nephew Bartholomew Cokes. Grace, at least, has a will of her own and makes her own choices in the course of the fair, pairing ultimately with Winwife.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Haynes, *Social Relations*, suggests she is intrinsically opposed to the spirit of the fair and therefore an anti-communal figure.

From the structure of *The Staple of News* it might be assumed that Pecunia will be a silent, iconized, and allegorized figure, representative of money and desire; she is all of this and more, excepting the epithet of silent. In truth she speaks unexpectedly early on, on her first appearance at II.i., thwarting expectation as surely as Epicoene “herself” does.

As her name suggests, Pecunia is an allegorization of wealth. This has overtly literary origins in the medieval period’s representations of the temptations of wealth - for example, Lady Meed in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. In pursuing the “old way” in *The Staple of News* Jonson inherited many of the ambivalences that accrue around the subject of wealth;<sup>33</sup> Lady Meed is a highly equivocal characterization and yet she is toughminded in her demand that people understand what she represents. Pecunia is a similarly complex image of liberation and desire: ‘Pecunia is a loadstone, a creature of magnetic allure who becomes in Jonson’s scheme a complex embodiment of value, an object of conflicting desires, and a measure of society’s capacity for civilized and decorous behaviour.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See Robert C. Jones, ‘Jonson’s *The Staple of News*’s Gossips and Fulwell’s *Like Will to Like* : “The Old Way” in a New Morality Play’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 3 (1973), 74-77.

<sup>34</sup> See Anthony Parr’s introductory essay to his Revels edition of *The Staple of News* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 15. All subsequent references to this essay, henceforth Parr.

What becomes painfully clear during the play's development is that Pecunia is by and large a construct of male desires - sexual, fiscal, and professional; she is constantly subject and subjected to reinterpretation according to the needs of each man she encounters. She is the sole female presence in *The Staple of News*, apart from her household attendants, who are anyway answerable to Pennyboy Senior on all levels and even the victims of his sexual abuse. Her constraint by Senior physically embodies the constraints placed upon women by male readings, be they of an idealistic or misogynist taint; she suffocates in his festering mansion of wealth along with his other accumulated properties:

MORTGAGE	Please your grace to retire.	
BAND		I fear your grace
	Hath ta'en too much of the sharp air.	
PECUNIA		O no!
	I could endure to take a great deal more	
	(And with my constitution) were it left	
	Unto my choice.	
	( <i>The Staple of News</i> , II.i.45-49) <sup>35</sup>	

Pennyboy Canter has designated Pecunia a suitable wife for his prodigal son, Pennyboy Junior, in his faked will. She is part of the test Canter imposes on his son but her assent in this is never sought; she is merely part of the Pennyboy family possessions and therefore bequeathable at will. The dead hand of the *mortmain*

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<sup>35</sup> The edition of *The Staple of News* used throughout is that ed. by Anthony Parr, for the Revel Series (see previous note). For the purposes of quotation within the text, henceforth *The Staple of News*.

legal procedure ostensibly fastens most affirmatively around her neck.

Pecunia writhes under the self-punitive attentions of

Pennyboy Senior:

Why do you so, my guardian? I not bid you.  
 Cannot my grace be gotten, and held too,  
 Without your self-tormentings and your watches,  
 Your macerating of your body thus  
 With cares and scantings of your diet and rest?  
 (*The Staple of News*, II.i.21-25)

The forthright, self-opinionated tones of Pecunia's speech are indicative of her dialogue as a whole.<sup>36</sup> Significantly enough, Jonson chooses to accord her the final speech of the play proper. Whilst some might argue that she speaks this in her allegorized capacity, issuing a warning about financial management, the warning is equally applicable to women. What is important is that Pecunia is rarely, if ever, a silent woman.

Pecunia has more than enough wealth and status to define her own future, and establish a "room of her own" far away from Pennyboy Senior, since money does accord women a degree of independence (although still limited) otherwise unfeasible in a patriarchal society. Pecunia is an object of desire in business terms because she is a potentially fine patron and the Staple of News woos her attentions as a consequence. As a monied woman

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<sup>36</sup> I take issue with Ostovich's reading of Pecunia's character as an 'empty and malleable . . . cipher' ('The Appropriation of Pleasure', p. 428).

she is a counterpart to Placentia Steele in *The Magnetic Lady*:

Pecunia has obvious financial attraction and allure.

Pennyboy Senior keeps Pecunia in a state of confinement for fear of the bounty and generosity she possesses the means to display. He wants her exclusive attentions:

You are a noble, young, free, gracious lady,  
And would be everybody's in your bounty;  
But you must not be so. They are a few  
That know your merit, lady, and can value't.  
Yourself scarce understands your proper powers.  
They are almighty, and that we, your servants,  
That have the honour here to stand so near you,  
Know, and can use too.

(*The Staple of News*, II.i.31-38)

The irony is that Pecunia understands the extent of her powers and male delimitation of them (in the dubious name of serfdom to her).

Pennyboy Senior is subjecting her to the usual legalistic reading of women as incapable of handling their own affairs; legal recognition was therefore usually accorded the male partner - husband, father, or uncle - hence Pecunia is confined in this state of wardship like Grace Wellborn. Senior extends this belief so far as to assume that the Princess's assistants know her state of health better than she does; he denies Pecunia any say in her own "constitution". Throughout the play, the denial of her civil rights is astonishing. The ending of the play amidst a general debate over civic liberties is therefore relevant to her case and it is



Corvino's sodomitical embrace only to be returned home to her father, the price on her head trebled.

When Pennyboy Junior proposes to escort his new companion to dine in Picklock's lodgings in Ram Alley, Canter does his utmost to dissuade him:

O fie! An alley, and a cook's shop, gross!  
 'Twill savour, sir, most rankly of 'em both.  
 Let your meat rather follow you to a tavern.  
 (*The Staple of News*, II.v.115-17)

Ram Alley was a notorious London site of prostitution but Picklock protests that a tavern is an equally unsavoury location to take a Princess. A contentious and noticeably male-directed debate ensues over the fit place to escort a female; Pecunia's opinion is never asked. Canter's justificatory precedent for his choice is that Pocahontas, the Native American Indian daughter of the Virginia colony's tribal leader, who came to England in 1616, stayed in two taverns during that time. The rather uglier historical details of that sojourn reveal that Pocahontas was another female captive, of exploring English sailors; she was converted, baptized, and eventually married to an Englishman. In 1617 Pocahontas attended one of Jonson's Christmastide masques but died of ill-health before being able to return to her own country. The analogy with Pecunia is clear and tragic: they are both female

captives, subjected to male readings, both during their lives and in historical retrospect.<sup>37</sup>

In *The Staple of News* the female gossips, Jonson's onstage audience, leap, verbally at least, to the defence of women who are the victims of male authorings. All the emissaries of the Staple are noticeably male - the only female assistance sought in the production of news is financial. Recognizing the topical reference to the Spanish Infanta, Isabella, (Prince Charles's not-to-be bride in the early 1620s) in Pecunia's characterization, the gossips remark:

CENSURE	Ay, therein they abuse an honourable princess, it is thought.
MIRTH	By whom is it so thought? Or where lies the abuse?
CENSURE	Plain in the styling her 'Infanta' and giving her three names. ( <i>The Staple of News</i> , II. Intermean, 21-25)

Mirth, with a truly Jonsonian note of concern, warns Censure to 'Take heed it lie not in the vice of your interpretation.' (*The Staple of News*, II. Intermean, l.26), suggesting that she is fancifully costuming something that is, in terms of its readings, utterly as it appears on the surface; yet the same warning can be reapplied to the male "dressings" of Pecunia and indeed of the memory of Pocahontas. As Tattle says:

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<sup>37</sup> cf. Stephen Orgel, 'Shakespeare and the Cannibals', in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. by Marjorie Garber (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987), pp. 40-66, where Orgel discusses colonial issues and a culture of consent whereby European versions of Indians were offered, such as the tendency to anglicize the figure of Pocahontas.



I would hearken and hearken, and censure if I saw cause, for  
th'other princess's sake - Pocahontas - surnamed the blessed,  
whom he has abused indeed - and I do censure him and will  
censure him: to say she came forth of a tavern was said like a  
paltry poet.

(*The Staple of News*, II.Intermean, 39-44)

A second time Mirth issue a note of admonition that 'That's but  
one gossip's opinion,' (*The Staple of News*, II. Intermean, 1.45) -  
and what is worse that gossip is gossip Tattle.

Doubtless, we should proceed with caution in reading these  
women as a riposte to male stereotyping of women in the play  
since they too are male constructs, authored by Jonson himself. I  
would be equally hesitant of according to Jonson any  
protofeminist stance on account of the gossips' defensive dialogue,  
but as characters they pose an interesting counterpoint to the  
usual charges of misogyny. Jonson certainly represents the  
perpetual objectification of women by men via characters such as  
Dol Common in *The Alchemist* but, as Pecunia's strong stage  
presence evidences, he never does so at the expense of silencing  
their individual voices.

#### VI: 'The goblin matrimony'

The marriages depicted on the Jonsonian stage are rather  
unnatural constructions. Many of Jonson's wife-figures fare badly;  
a semi-positive example might be the Littlewit partnership in

*Bartholomew Fair* but by the close of that play Win the wife has been easily persuaded by Knockem that adultery is the best course. Proceeding onwards from the Stagekeeper's image in the Induction of a whore placed on her head, that play subjects women to brutal examinations of all kinds.<sup>38</sup> Placentia's devoted parents in *The Magnetic Lady*, in truth the parents of Pleasance, 'lov'd together, like a paire of Turtles,' (*The Magnetic Lady*, I.v.4)<sup>39</sup> but are already long dead when the play commences.<sup>40</sup>

The brutality with which Corvino treats his partner Celia is deliberately difficult for any audience to reconcile with *Volpone's* supposed comic genre; his attacking alliteration and plethora of syphilitic and venereal verbs and adjectives pour themselves over Celia (*Volpone*, II.v.1-9, 15-18). Corvino's anger at her 'public' performance - 'You were an actor, with your handkerchief!' (*Volpone*, II.v.40) - is expressed in similarly violent terms:

And thy restraint, before, was liberty  
To what I now decree: and therefore, mark me.

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<sup>38</sup> cf. Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> The edition of *The Magnetic Lady; or, The Humors Reconciled* used throughout is that contained within *H & SVI*, henceforth *The Magnetic Lady*.

<sup>40</sup> The play at least ends on an optimistic note with the marriages of Compass and Pleasance, and Captain Ironside and Lady Loadstone, partnerships dictated by magnetic theory according to Ostovich's illuminating account of the play (see Ostovich, 'The Appropriation of Pleasure').

First, I will have this bawdy light dammed up;  
 And till't be done, some two, or three yards off,  
 I'll chalk a line: o'er which, if thou but chance  
 To set thy desperate foot, more Hell, more horror,  
 More wild, remorseless rage shall seize on thee,  
 Than on a conjurer, that had heedless left  
 His circle's safety, ere his devil was laid.  
 Then here's a lock, which I will hang upon thee;  
 And now I think on't, I will keep thee backwards;  
 Thy lodging shall be backwards; thy walks backwards;  
 Thy prospect - all be backwards; and no pleasure,  
 That thou shalt know, but backwards:

(*Volpone*, II.v.48-61)

The sodomitical taint of this language is plain; its vocabulary of restraint as well as its mention of devils, circles, and conjurors is a precursor of Fitzdottrel's discourse in *The Devil is an Ass* a decade later. Neither play condones male violence, be it verbal or actual (Fitzdottrel, in a shocking departure, actually strikes his wife onstage); this argues for careful characterization on Jonson's part, a nuance often missed in extravagant caricatured performances of both these husbands' roles on the modern stage.

In *Epicoene* the farcical marriage of the Otters predominates, alongside Morose's own ill-fated venture into the marriage-market. Captain Otter proclaims, through a haze of alcohol:

Wife! Buzz! *Titivilitium*. There's no such thing in nature. I confess, gentlemen, I have a cook, a laundress, a house-drudge, that serves my necessary turns, and goes under that title; but he's an ass that will be so uxorious to tie his affections to one circle.

(*Epicoene*, IV.ii.57-62)

but he is effecting a fatal misreading of the kind Corvino perpetrates upon his faithful wife. Perhaps Otter's biggest mistake is not to realize that he has been set up by the gallants,

and his wife is overhearing every condemnatory word. His description of the marriage is entirely inaccurate: not only is Mrs. Otter its physical and vocal strength - as La Foole reflects, 'She commands all at home.' (*Epicoene*, I.iv.32) - she is also its financial backbone, just as Frances Fitzdottrel is in her marriage in *The Devil is an Ass*. This reverses more general expectations of the husband as provider; Mistress Otter pays for the Captain's clothes, food, and drink. In the latter instance we realize that he is the spendthrift of the relationship, for which reason she threatens at one point to stop his allowance as if he were a child not to be trusted with its pocket money. Preferring the terms of absolutism to the subservient connotations of 'wife', Mistress Otter is addressed in her home by her weakling husband as 'Princess'. Hers is a tyrannous rule, and yet she harbours greater ambitions, as her dreams of the city and being Lady Mayoress denote. *Epicoene* will similarly prove a despot, dictating to Morose exactly what "she" intends to do.

Marriage in *Epicoene* is at the mercy of Truewit's savage tongue. When Morose announces his marital intentions, Truewit unleashes a verbal diatribe against the institution:

Marry, your friends do wonder, sir, the Thames being so near, wherein you may drown so handsomely; or London Bridge, at a low fall, with a fine leap, to hurry you down the stream; or such a delicate steeple i'the town, as Bow, to vault from; or a braver height, as Paul's; or if you affected to do it nearer

home, and a shorter way, an excellent garret window, into the street; or a beam, in the said garret, with this halter;

*He shows him a halter*

which they have sent, and desire that you would sooner commit your grave head to this knot, than to the wedlock noose; or take a little sublimate, and go out of the world, like a rat; or a fly (as one said) with a straw i'your arse: any way, rather than to follow this goblin matrimony.

(*Epicoene*, II.ii.21-39)

Like much of Truewit's condemnation of women, we should be wary of ascribing these extremist views to Jonson.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless a parody of marriage is taking place both here and in other plays in which Jonson had a literary hand.

*The Devil is an Ass* has the aforementioned Fitzdottrel relationship, but also the outspoken gallant, Wittipol; his treatment of women is markedly different from Truewit's. Jonson once again resists type. In a remarkable departure from his Boccaccian source, Jonson has his seducer cease sexual advances towards the wife at her request. Despite having earlier voiced the familiar arguments of *carpe diem* poetry:

Flowers

Though fair, are oft but of one morning. Think,  
All beauty does last until the autumn,  
You grow old while I tell you this.

(*The Devil is an Ass*, I.vi.128-31)

Wittipol, in an inverse movement to Volpone's leap out of his sickbed, declares himself no ravisher but a true friend. Frances puts this to the test:

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<sup>41</sup> See Juvenal, 'Satire VI', in *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. by G.G. Ramsey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

My fortunes standing in this precipice,  
 'Tis counsel that I want, and honest aids:  
 And in this name I need you for a friend!  
 Never in any other; for his ill  
 Must not make me, sir, worse.  
 ( *The Devil is an Ass*, IV.vi.24-28)

Her striking commonsense syllables may for some spectators fail to tally with her decision to remain within the (albeit newly-defined) confines of such a sterile marriage, but perhaps the more significant event is the joint response of Wittipol and Manly:

Virtue shall never ask my succours twice;  
 Most friend, most man, your counsels are commands:  
 Lady, I can love goodness in you more  
 Than I did beauty; and do here entitle  
 Your virtue to the power, upon a life  
 You shall engage in any fruitful service,  
 Even to forfeit.  
 ( *The Devil is an Ass*, IV.vi.35-41)

This is a different understanding of service to the Machiavellian version of Meercraft and Tailbush elsewhere in the play. Wittipol responds to Frances's virtue and in doing so both he and the aptly-named Manly display their *virtù* ; not that of the young male ravisher of *La Fortuna* in *The Prince*, but that of a man capable of an egalitarian approach to relationships, sexual and social.

Together Wittipol and Manly set about retrieving Frances's fortunes from her husband's (lack of) control - an act of recovery amidst many others. Indeed intrinsic to many of Jonson's depictions of marriage appears to be the seizure of power in some form by the female half. This stands in direct contradistinction to

the ecclesiastical homilies on marriage which tutor obedience and subservience to women. This is most directly figured in the female Academy of *Epicoene*, where the ladies' assumption of control over their lives extends even to biological operations, since they practice birth control and openly pursue their sexual partners. *The Magnetic Lady* with its feminine conspiracy to "hush up" Placentia's pre-marital pregnancy is further example of female power and initiative in the sexual commonwealth.

## VII: Shed snakeskin in the history of politics

Sexuality brings its own sources of power for women; if this power is acknowledged by authors, readers, and audiences then women's political relevance can never be entirely denied. A narrow definition of politics excludes women but this is not the definition being proffered by Jonson in his plays.<sup>42</sup>

The need for women in both the daily and political life of Rome is acknowledged from the very beginning of Jonson's Roman tragedy *Catiline* through Catiline's employment of his wife and her female friends to woo potential voters for him. Fulvia also proves crucial to the fate of the conspiracy, and in her quest for unlimited

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<sup>42</sup> On the potency of female action within the domain of sexuality, see Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977).

money and sex resembles Catiline himself. Many have felt that Cicero's politic wooing of Fulvia to persuade her to reveal all not only demeans the politician but denigrates womanhood as being too easily persuaded to any cause by sexual wiles.<sup>43</sup> Cethegus scornfully regards women as capable only of 'smock-treason', equating the sexual and the political merely as a means of denigrating women without recognizing that it is an area which invests women with a hitherto unrealized power.

In his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, John Dryden declares of the Fulvia-Sempronia scenes in *Catiline* that they demonstrate 'the Parliament of Women, the little envies of them to one another; and all that passes between Curio[sic] and Fulvia: scenes admirable in their kind, but of an ill mingle with the rest.'<sup>44</sup> His opinion appears to be that women are manifestly fit subjects only for plays other than the serious Roman tragedy Jonson purports to be writing here; however, his usage of the term 'parliament of women' opens up a wider spectrum of possibility.

Surprisingly, Barton's criticism of the play participates in this rather intolerant generic limitation on gender. She feels that

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<sup>43</sup> Kathleen McLuskie, in *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989), argues that whilst women do play an integral role in the politics of this play this is merely a mark of how the political situation has denigrated in the republic. This is not a view I feel is borne out by the text.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, p. 156.



the “women’s scenes” carry comedy dangerously close to the epicentre of the play, thus undercutting the dignity of both Catiline and Cicero, and somehow diminishing by their very presence the importance of state matters (noticeably a similar charge is rarely levied against the “willow scene” of *Othello*). Barton speaks somewhat unforgivingly of how Fulvia, chatting first with her maid Galla and then with Sempronia, places in apposition air fresheners and state affairs, as though they were all somehow of equal importance; yet the very pettiness of her subject matter placed in conjunction with the conspiratorial ideas of Catiline, Cethegus, and the others provides exactly the undermining effect that Jonson seeks to achieve. For Fulvia, state affairs are conducted as precisely that - affairs; she utilizes her sexuality to secure political and personal preferment, initially welcoming her previously-jettisoned lover Curius back into her bed when he promises her the spoils of Rome, but then in turn casually betraying him for the more lavish incentives offered by Cicero.

That Fulvia’s action of betrayal is also partially prompted by Sempronia’s possession of a more primary role in the conspiracy is less a sign of the petty jealousies and ambitions of women than evidence of the limited social resources allowed them; it provides an analogy with the same “little envies” that operate within the

male political sphere of the Senate and the Consulship. Jealousy is after all a driving force in the Cicero-Catiline opposition, as each man vies to dominate the political discourse of Rome. As the Chorus declares of the republic:

Her women wear  
The spoils of nations in an ear  
Chang'd for the treasure of a shell,  
And in their loose attires do swell  
More light than sails when all winds play;  
Yet are the men more loose than they,  
More kemb'd and bath'd, and rub'd and trim'd,  
More sleek'd, more soft, and slacker limb'd;  
As prostitute;

( *Catiline*, I.i.555-63)

Sempronia is a figure of no mean political skill in this play;

Galla describes her discourse as being all:

O'the Republic, madam, and the state,  
And how she was in debt, and where she meant  
To raise fresh sums. She's a great stateswoman.

( *Catiline*, II.i.36-38)

Sempronia holds a high personal opinion of herself, claiming to be an orator and scholar the match of Cicero. Clearly educated, she speaks admirable Latin and Greek and is therefore credited with a 'masculine wit'. She also possesses accurate knowledge of political events: hoping to assist Catiline in the forthcoming elections for the consulship, she has been writing letters to that effect. Chapter XXV in Jonson's source, Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, does touch on both her education and her masculine wit in describing Sempronia, but the more political angle of her being a potential

female ambassador appears to be a Jonsonian interpolation.<sup>45</sup>

Sempronia is aware of all the competitors in the race but wrongly predicts that Cicero's nomination will be crossed by the nobility; this leads Barton to suggest that her learning is a pretence but Sempronia's understanding of 'common business' is I think central to her character.

In a subsequent scene, Sempronia reflects on the general exclusion of women from any active political life - in the narrow understanding of the term as meaning to be an ambassador or a spy - suggesting that much is sacrificed in terms of Roman achievement by this:

I do wonder much  
That states and commonwealths employ not women  
To be ambassadors sometimes. We should  
Do as good public service, and could make  
As honorable spies, for so Thucydides  
Calls all ambassadors.

( *Catiline*, IV.v.8-13)

The play's events appear to endorse her counsel since Cicero's discovery of the conspiracy against him hinges upon the double agency of Fulvia. This is not simply further opportunity for Jonson to berate the duplicity of womanhood; the point is rather that they are witnessed as being equal to men in the

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<sup>45</sup> Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, in *Works*, trans. by J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921). My thanks also to the library at Clare College, Cambridge for allowing me to work with Jonson's own copy of this text, one of the few extant from his personal library which contain annotations clearly in his hand, both underlining and commenting (in Latin) on the passages he employed in the construction of *Catiline*. Jonson's other major source was Cicero.

(political?) skills of calculation, possibly even exceeding them in that the men, excepting Cicero, fail to take this potential adequately into account.

The example of Fulvia is intriguing for a number of reasons; as a prostitute she is making decisions about her sexuality (although in deeper sociological terms we may wish still to regard her career as male-necessitated), and even though Curius declares that he will force her to sleep with him her response is far from passive. In truth it is quasi-phallic since she draws a knife (often cause for “pointed” penis-jokes in Jonson: witness *Epicoene*) and Curius rapidly submits to her greater sexual power with an interesting choice of expression:

Fulvia, you do know  
The strengths you have upon me; do not use  
Your power too like a tyrant; I can bear  
Almost until you break me.  
(*Catiline*, II.i.293-96)

Curius’s sense of personal weakness in the face of her sexual and seductive powers accords Fulvia a strength she is denied in the more overtly political world of senate and suffrage.

Much that has been written on the ‘parliament of women’ in the early modern period looks from a retrospective vantage point - that of the Leveller women’s first petition to Parliament in 1649. These women refused to be silent, no longer accepting that their husbands or fathers should speak for them in an act of

ventriloquism, and the actions of Jonsonian characters such as the Ladies' Collegiate in *Epicoene*, or Frances Fitzdottrel in *The Devil is an Ass* are surely a precursor of this political change. Jonson may not have been a protofeminist but he inaugurated and advanced debates that would emerge with full verbal force during the civil war period.

CHAPTER FIVE: *VOLPONE*: “EVERY TIME I DESCRIBE A CITY  
I AM SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT VENICE”

There is nothing unique in suggesting that Ben Jonson was as meticulous in his Venetian staging of *Volpone* as in his scholarly appropriation of classical sources for his Roman plays.<sup>1</sup> Whilst *Volpone* may not have had extensive accompanying notes like *Sejanus* and *Catiline*, nevertheless a detailed rather than merely impressionistic depiction of the city of Venice at a particular point in its historical and political evolution is offered.

The accompanying notes to the Quarto versions of his Roman tragedies constitute in part Jonson’s citation of his sources, yet they also evidence the highly individual choices and selections he made in employing such sources. If, despite wholesale transposition of their prose, Jonson’s use of Cicero, Sallust, Tacitus, and others in *Sejanus* and *Catiline* was by no means unevaluative, similarly Venice underwent a literary and dramatic transmogrification in *Volpone*.<sup>2</sup> The authorial and performative reshaping of the city of water was an intensely political act,

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<sup>1</sup> Recent essays by Anne Barton and Brian Parker have lucidly covered the bibliographical ground which asserts this notion, see Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*; and Brian Parker, ‘Jonson’s Venice’, in *Theatre of the English and Italian Renaissance*, ed. by J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 92-112.

<sup>2</sup> I explore these ideas in greater detail in ‘Queasy to be Touched’.

informed at every turn by questions of Venetian and European constitutional development and also by the politics of dramatic convention itself. Jonson's Venice is a 'city of disguises' such as forms the backdrop to Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, a place where selfhood is uncontained and where notions of identity can be freely investigated and exploited; it is also the disease-ridden, death-haunted island of Thomas Mann's *Death In Venice*. It is indeed Venice.

It is now something of a literary-critical cliché that "foreign" locations in plays of the early modern period were employed as shields from accusations of topicality and sedition, and therefore from the over-anxious penstrokes of the censor; however our monolithic understanding of the term "censorship" is itself undergoing critical scrutiny at the present time and as a result we must question the overdetermined reading of locations other than English.<sup>3</sup> Whilst undoubtedly *Volpone* signifies its connections with the increasingly urbanized London in which Jonson himself

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<sup>3</sup> See, amongst others, Richard Burt, *Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), and '(Un)Censoring in Detail: Thomas Middleton, Fetishism, and the Regulation of Dramatic Discourse', forthcoming in *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture*, ed. by Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Janet Clare, *Art Made Tongue-Tied by Authority: Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press(Revels), 1990); Richard Dutton, *Mastering the Revels: The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and Blair Worden, 'Literature and Political Censorship in Early Modern Europe', in *Too Mighty to be Free: Censorship and the Press in Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. by A.C. Duke and C.A. Tamse (Zutphen: De Walburg Press, 1987), pp. 45-62.

was resident, the play is most decidedly set in Renaissance, republican Venice.

Leah Marcus proffers a similar argument in relation to Vienna in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, suggesting that the city of that play is 'not only London. It can also be taken as Vienna, or some more generalized depiction of a European city under absolutist or imperial rule. The conflict between local liberties and emerging central authority was not London's problem alone.'<sup>4</sup> That very conflict would provide substance for Jonsonian drama throughout his career and in *Volpone* finds a very precise location in the oligarchical Venetian republic.

Jonson's Venice is realized by precise topography; its streets, *piazze*, and bridges are carefully identified by character and dramatist alike. There is a case that critics are 'not taken enough' with what Stephen Greenblatt describes as the complicated 'thingness' of this play; yet this for him connotes an empty centre, a 'deadness' which 'has all along been lurking just beneath the glittering surface of *Volpone*'s existence.'<sup>5</sup> The 'vertiginous swirl of words' which for Greenblatt constitutes an avoidance of depth, for Anne Barton threatens to engulf the play's characters in its

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<sup>4</sup> Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> Greenblatt, 'The False Ending in *Volpone*'.



suffocating density: ‘Things in *Volpone*, the urban detritus of a civilization out of control, are perpetually on the verge of rising up to drown the people who wade and push their way through them.’<sup>6</sup> Barton’s notion is in many respects more suggestive: there is something akin to suffocation in the crammed nature of Venetian architecture and civic design, its cramped back passages and numerous blind allies. The city reflects the potentially stifling atmosphere of *Volpone*’s bedroom.

The representation of Venice is not wholly reliant on surface details; the city is realized in all its political complexity: its ideological centre is revealed and explored during the course of events. But it is also an early modern republican state, the focus of European propaganda and myth, and, as such, endlessly recounted in constitutional texts; the model of government cited by Machiavelli and Guicciardini, Contarini and Giannotti. It is, paradoxically enough, the home of the Doge, a quasi-monarchical figurehead, and of republican state pageantry; the politics of the city are part of the politics of the play-text.

The city-state *per se* has had enormous influence on the way we think and speak about politics: the latter word even derives from the Greek *polis*. Yet many city-states embody what

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<sup>6</sup> Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, p. 108.

one historian has termed the ‘contradictions of freedom’;<sup>7</sup> many of the most famous Italian republics - for example Florence and Venice - were, strictly speaking, oligarchies. A myth may well have grown up around the notion of Venice as the perfect mixed constitution (*stato misto* in Machiavellian terms), a blend as it was of Doge (monarchy), Senate (aristocracy), and Great Council (populace), but in essence it was an oligarchy since power rested in the hands of a closed group of approximately two thousand male nobles. That oligarchy clearly operates in *Volpone*, a play distinctly concerned with issues of rank and gender, of localism and centralism, and of the role of the individual within the (city) state.

Lewis Lewkenor’s English translation of Gasparo Contarini’s *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum*, entitled *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, had been published in 1599 and was familiar to Jonson. Herford and the Simpsons suggested that this text was likely to be Jonson’s sole source for the political details of *Volpone*. Yet Jonson was familiar with the contents of Italian expatriate John Florio’s library of Italian textbooks in London; he utilized Florio’s *A Worlde of Wordes* to furnish his Venetian play-text with Italian terminology. Jonson’s

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Mackenney, *The City-State, 1500-1700: Republican Liberty in an Age of Princely Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 1.

desire for accuracy and authenticity suggests that he would have sought access to a number of other texts on the subject of the Venetian republic.

This becomes an interesting issue if we consider some of the details, constitutional and otherwise, of *Volpone*. In Contarini's text the Avocatori are prosecutors without powers of judgement. Lewkenor rather loosely translates this as 'judges or magistrates' and Herford and the Simpsons suggest that Jonson merely follows this inaccuracy in his depiction of the Avocatori of this play as judges. Other critics suggest the scene is modelled more on English than Venetian law, yet Jonson was not usually either this Anglocentric or impositional, as his detailed depiction of the ancient Roman republic in *Catiline* indicates. Possibly he was not importing an alien legal system into Venice but merely failing to be totally accurate in his dramatic rendering of the operations of Venetian law.

However C.J. Gianakaris has shown that during a specific period in Venetian history the Avocatori did exercise judicial as well as investigative powers.<sup>8</sup> They were not superior to the Council of Ten or the Senate but they did approach parity with

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<sup>8</sup> C.J. Gianakaris, 'Jonson's Use of 'Avocatori' in *Volpone*', *ELN*, 12 (1974-75), 8-14, suggests that Jonson displays 'a sophisticated grasp of Venetian justice as it existed during the republican period of that city.' (p. 14); this is a problematic idea since the republican period in Venice was a lengthy one and the particular period in the Avocatori's history Gianakaris is discussing is a far more restricted one.

these central bodies; even the Doge fell under their scrutiny by the fifteenth century, as would a *magnifico* like Volpone - the precision of Jonson's text is telling here, confirming a specific concern with the Venetian republican moment.

Gianakaris posits the work of Donato Giannotti as a possible alternative source for Jonson since his text on Venice is far less ambiguous on the role of the Avocatori than Contarini's. That Giannotti was also far more the inheritor of Niccolò Machiavelli's republican thinking (set out in texts such as the *Discorsi* - which examined the myth of the Venetian republic) than Contarini's more obviously aristocratic leanings lends weight to the argument that Jonson had a specifically republican as well as Venetian theme in this play.

Sir Politic Would-be is generally understood to be a parody of the English ambassador to Venice in the late sixteenth century, Sir Henry Wotton. Wotton was an acquaintance of Jonson and his dispatches from Venice were widely responsible for creating the

English perception of *La Serenissima*, its rituals and its politics.<sup>9</sup>

Sir Pol claims to have read Machiavelli:

. . . for your religion, profess none;  
 But wonder, at the diversity of all;  
 And, for your part, protest, were there no other  
 But simply the laws o'th'land, you could content you;  
 Nick Machiavel, and Monsieur Bodin, both,  
 Were of this mind. Then, must you learn the use,  
 And handling of your silver fork, at meals;  
 The metal of your glass (these are the main matters,  
 With your Italian), and to know the hour  
 When you must eat your melons and your figs.  
 (Volpone, IV.i.22-31)<sup>10</sup>

In a manner akin to Corvino, Pol is a notorious misreader of events and of the very texts he claims a political and philosophical affinity with. He completely misses the complexities and nuances of Machiavelli's theorizing on religion and there is something haplessly naive in his parallel evaluation of a book like Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, an aristocratic text on etiquette and the culturally-refined life of the ceremonially-determined court of Urbino, and the hardline political theories of Machiavelli.

Pol's wife is another of Jonson's political dreamers in

*Volpone* and she is another mere reader of surfaces. Easily duped

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<sup>9</sup> One of the more spectacular events witnessed and recounted by Wotton was the lavish reception ceremonies staged in the city to welcome the French monarch Henri III in 1574. Volpone claims to have participated in these celebrations as an actor, telling Celia:

I am, now, as fresh,  
 As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight,  
 As when (in that so celebrated scene,  
 At recitation of our comedy,  
 For entertainment of the great Valois)  
 I acted young Antinous;  
 (III.vii.157-62).

<sup>10</sup> All further play quotations in this chapter are from *Volpone* unless otherwise stated.

by Mosca's tale of Pol's adventure with a courtesan, Lady Would-be thoroughly fails to comprehend the double standards her jealousy reveals. She fails to penetrate the multi-layered social and sexual politics of Venice: her make-up peels away all too easily under the operation of the steamy Venetian heat, leaving her amateur aspirations of social and political mobility, like those of her husband, unattractively exposed.

Rank was certainly a determining feature even in the supposedly democratic (although as we have seen less than democratic) Venetian republic. It is of particular pertinency in this play in the trial scenes themselves. The Fourth Avocatore, for all the supposed impartiality of his office, is tempted by the prospect of Mosca "the *magnifico*" (and his newly-inherited wealth as he understands it) as a possible husband for his daughter. When Mosca's low rank is eventually revealed his sentence is pronounced accordingly:

You appear  
 T'have been the chiefest minister, if not plotter,  
 In all these lewd impostures; and now, lastly,  
 Have, with your impudence, abused the court,  
 And habit of a gentleman of Venice,  
 Being a fellow of no birth, or blood:  
 For which, our sentence is, first thou be whipped;  
 Then live perpetual prisoner in our galleys.  
(V.xii.107-14)

Volpone escapes similar sentence by dint of his rank: 'By blood, and rank a gentleman, canst not fall / Under like censure;' (V.xii.117-18) but is instead incarcerated in the hospital of the

*Incurabili*, permanently enclosed indoors, to suffocate in health for having feigned sickness until he is truly ill and lame from the restriction. The consummate performer is effectively denied an audience and that may of course be regarded as punishment enough. Yet Jonson allows Volpone to address the audience in the play's infamous epilogue and this can itself stand as a comment on the injustices of the republic's legal system: that the lower class Mosca is silenced even by the stage whilst the *magnifico* can use (abuse?) the audience as a court of appeal. Volpone can step beyond the play's boundaries and continue to transgress whereas Mosca's performative skills have been effectively crushed and contained by an oligarchical republic's imbalanced version of discipline and punishment.<sup>11</sup>

Harsh sentences are also meted out in *Every Man In(Q)*, to Bobadilla and Matheo. Doctor Clement pronounces that the pair are to be imprisoned and subsequently carried out to the market-cross and bound. Dressed in motley and labelled a fool, Bobadilla,

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<sup>11</sup> A number of the essays collated in Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: Ben Jonson's Volpone, or the Fox* (New Haven and New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), including Bloom's own introduction, repeat the formula that the harsh sentences imposed on Volpone and Mosca are neither Venice's nor London's but Jonson's own castigation of the indulgences of the theatre. These essays acknowledge the energies of the play but refuse to ascribe them to Jonson. Such readings miss the nuances and subtlety of the Jonsonian creation; witness Barton's observation (first made in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*) that 'The sentences themselves . . . are unashamedly those of the dramatist rather than the obtuse magistrates of Venice.' (p. 110). If so why then is not Volpone's ultimate act of transgression, the epilogue, also unashamedly Jonson's?

the braggart soldier, will be forced to wear a rod at his side, a mock-heroic version of the sword he claimed such expertise in handling; this public castration ritual will leave him deprived of all manliness. In *Every Man In(F)* Jonson appears to have repented over his original court-martialing of his characters - Bobadill and Matthew are simply made by the Justice to stand outside in his courtyard during supper. Jonson, supposedly the moral scourge of early modern theatre, clearly came to question Draconian sentencing, and audience response to the fate of Mosca and Volpone is often a marker of this.

Venice's almost schizophrenic existence as a glamorous European city and as a place of harsh sentences is quite literally bridged by the *Ponti di Sospiri* which joins the *Palazzo Ducale* and the damp, dank prisons where the republic's condemned were held. Locations are as important and diverse in this play. The various scenes in *Volpone* take place both indoors and outdoors, in the city-streets (carefully located), in the *Scrutineo*, the Senate House of Venice, and in various houses. The most recurrent house is that of Volpone himself, with its central visual focus of the bed. Jonsonian criticism has in the past treated Volpone and Mosca's abode (and I stress this co-habitation quite deliberately) as a



“politics-free zone”.<sup>12</sup> By extension, such judgements depoliticize Volpone’s “bed-trick”, rendering it merely an antithetical alternative to the ‘tricks of state’ mentioned by Sir Politic Would-be. (This is a misreading, not least because it denies Volpone the acknowledgement of his professional capabilities as a politician.)<sup>13</sup> In truth Volpone and Mosca’s household has positioned itself as a site of liminal pursuits and beliefs, with all the threatening and dangerous connotations that such thresholds usually entail. Their abode is a point where limitations are tested and exploited.

Boundaries between the inside and the outside and between different kinds of property are clearly demarcated in this play. Jean-Christophe Agnew has written lucidly of the significance of the ancient marketplace as a threshold or *limen*, with obvious application to *Bartholomew Fair* and *Coriolanus* (where the word ‘threshold’ resonates and where Tullus Aufidius and Antium represent the liminal or marginal), but his ideas are equally valuable for a consideration of *Volpone* and the function of that play’s various settings, political and domestic:

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<sup>12</sup> A welcome exception is William W.E. Slights, ‘The Play of Conspiracies in *Volpone*’, in Bloom, *Volpone*, pp. 113-30. He relates the play’s various competing and conflicting conspiracies as a product of a post-Gunpowder plot and paranoid Britain.

<sup>13</sup> Skills which Jonas Barish rightfully recognizes as Volpone’s in ‘The Double-Plot in *Volpone*’, in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Jonas A. Barish (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 93-105.

Threshold rituals . . . developed as ceremonial metaphors straddling the uncharted realm between the physical and the symbolic, the secular and the sacred, the past and the future. They ordered the passage from one stage of life to another, one state of mind to another, one household to another.<sup>14</sup>

*Volpone* straddles just such uncharted realms. Venice is famous for its secularization of religious ceremony - the Doge regularly performed quasi-religious rituals such as the annual marriage of the city to the sea (a threshold ritual in itself; it is interesting to see how Venice's lagoon geography rendered it both liminal and secure).

The opening scene of *Volpone* can be regarded as an extended threshold ritual; Volpone worships a distinctly secular God at his household shrine - Money - a sign for Greenblatt that God has been decentred in secular Venice:<sup>15</sup> 'Open the shrine, that I may see my saint' (I.i.2). As in *The Alchemist*, and in the genre of farce, the plot is propelled by the knocking on the door of various new characters, each in this instance performing a, by now, well-established bedside ritual before the supposedly declining and dying Volpone: a ritual performed not only to ensure his passage into the other world but to ensure their

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<sup>14</sup> Agnew, pp. 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> See Greenblatt, 'The False Ending in *Volpone*', and for a detailed exposition of the opening scene of *Volpone*, see Martin Butler, *Ben Jonson: Volpone: A Critical Study* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

personal inclusion, preferably to the exclusion of others, in his anxiously-anticipated will - another less than republican gesture.

Volpone and Mosca exploit this ritual for all it is worth; Agnew has stated that those involved in the 'transitional moment of ritual passage' are called "liminaries" by anthropologists and are often masked or androgynous figures, or travesties of the surrounding social system. Such a description clearly fits both Volpone and Mosca and the other inhabitants of their liminal abode - Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno. But it is Mosca who perhaps most of all negotiates the equivocal region of the threshold in this play. He answers the door; he travels into the street and to other households such as Corvino's; he is dispatched to put about publicly the greatly exaggerated news of Volpone's "death".

Described in the *dramatis personae* of the play as the *magnifico's* 'parasite', Mosca the flesh-fly would seem to fulfil this title. A parasite feeds off his/her host yet the term was not always so negative: initially it meant the guest who fed alongside the host. The prefix 'para' indicates something 'alongside', 'near' or 'beside', something 'beyond' or 'resembling', 'similar or subsidiary to'; the term then contains within it ideas both of proximity and distance; the label is itself an equivocation.

J. Hillis Miller has described a parasite as ‘something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master.’<sup>16</sup> All of these permutations relate to Mosca’s role within the ‘domestic economy’ of Volpone’s household. That household exposes the patronage network as a focus of nervousness and anxiety, not only in Volpone’s exploitation of his clients through their attempted exploitation of him, but also through its complication of the servant-master relationship; that particular seemingly binary opposition becomes a site of tension (when Volpone decides disastrously to reveal his “resurrection” from the dead, Mosca’s desperate cry is revelatory of this: ‘(Why, patron!)’ (V.xii.88)).

Michael McCanles has demonstrated that Jonson was hugely influenced in his views on patronage by the works of Seneca, in particular by his accounts of patronage practices in the late Roman republic and the early Principate: an interesting choice of period in terms of Jonson’s Roman plays, *Sejanus* (early Principate) and

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<sup>16</sup> J. Hillis Miller, ‘The Critic as Host’, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom and others (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 217-53 (p. 219). Although this article makes no direct reference to *Volpone* I am indebted to it for its invaluable insight into the related theme of parasitism.

*Catiline* (late republic), but also in its application to *Volpone*.<sup>17</sup>

McCanles suggests that Seneca redefined the supposed inequality between patron and client, recognizing a certain parity in the meeting of minds - clearly relevant for Tiberius and Sejanus, and for Mosca and Volpone.

For the majority of the play Volpone and Mosca clearly charm each other; their relationship appears to be one founded on a basis of mutual flattery and interdependence. They need each other, possibly they love each other; certainly some productions have stressed the homoerotic overtones of their interactions. If power is language, this pair are empowered by their gift of dialogue, dependent upon each other even for the maintenance of the iambic pentameter in a number of stichomythic exchanges in the course of the play. Separate from one another they are seemingly inadequate as the desperate attempt in the final scene by Volpone to re-recruit Mosca to his (and again the possessive is telling) team proves. By this stage in the play Volpone's price is no longer high enough to buy Mosca. In many respects Mosca is now something other than a straightforward parasite; he demands equal billing in this double act and without him Volpone is merely

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<sup>17</sup> Michael McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 184.

able to recall the glory of his former days. The host-fox has perhaps himself been parasitical upon his “servant” all along.

Mosca cannot escape his personal complicity in his master's crimes and he knows only too well that his lower social status will reward him with a harsher sentence for comparable acts. But he can predict and somewhat steal the thunder of Volpone's intended *coup de théâtre* at the close, thus claiming at least a little of its requested applause for himself; he departs from II.i. with the wonderfully prophetic line 'as I prosper, so applaud my art' (II.iv.38). That this is akin to the role and lines of many of Shakespeare's wise professional fool figures is no mere coincidence; Mosca is in many respects the licensed fool of this play and it is he who provides the most telling statements both in praise of folly and parasites.

Mosca prospers, albeit only temporarily, because he learns to use words with the same skill and artistry as his master, thus blurring the distinction between lead actor and apprentice, slave and master, as Miller has suggested is inherent in the concept of parasitism:

I fear, I shall begin to grow in love  
With my dear self, and my most prosperous parts,  
They do spring and burgeon; I can feel  
A whimsy i' my blood: I know not how,  
Success hath made me wanton . . .  
Oh! your parasite  
Is a most precious thing, dropped from above,  
Not bred 'mongst clods, and clotpolls, here on earth.  
I muse the mystery was not made a science,

It is so liberally professed! Almost  
 All the wise world is little else, in nature,  
 But parasites, or sub-parasites.

(III.i.1-5, 7-13)

Mosca's predominant monosyllables here linguistically mimic his fly-like dartings across the various thresholds of this play. As a flesh-fly he possesses virtual invisibility in Venetian society; whilst he may bemoan his lack of education and privilege to Voltore, his lack of status empowers as well as restricts him:

A thing in 'para', moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them. It also forms an ambiguous transition between one and the other.<sup>18</sup>

Writing on the theme of boundaries and frontiers, Stephen Greenblatt has observed that 'frontiers are places of highest tension, vigilance, delay . . .',<sup>19</sup> stating that 'Often, though not always, the frontier is the point beyond which they speak languages, eat foods, and worship gods that are simply not your own.'<sup>20</sup> The problems of boundaries - be they determined (at the risk of sounding like Polonius) as national, linguistic, ethical, historical, constitutional, generational, geographical, racial, social, sexual, political, or religious - are all confronted in the remarkable

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<sup>18</sup> Miller, p. 219.

<sup>19</sup> Greenblatt and Gunn, *Redrawing the Boundaries*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

text that is *Volpone* and it is Mosca who negotiates these dangerous frontiers.

The world of legality crosses the threshold and penetrates Volpone's household in a physical and tangible sense - Voltore, one of Volpone's "clients", is a lawyer. The trades and offices of the city also impinge upon the household: Corvino is a merchant. Volpone himself has the status of *magnifico*, a kind of magistrate, and cannot therefore totally escape social realities beyond his narrow front door.<sup>21</sup> It is also significant that Volpone feels forced to seek alternative public stages to the private one of his own bedroom. This particular indoors location has become utterly, suffocatingly predictable. When Act I.Sc.i. commences, the game of feigning illness to tempt flocks of predatory legacy-hunters to his door, bearing their valuable gifts, has obviously long been in motion. Such a familiar routine has it become that Mosca can identify each visitor by the sound of their knock. Three different successive visitors lead to a triple re-presentation of the script of deceit. A prevailing sense of ennui pervades the proceedings: in pursuit of the new, the novel, the exciting, Volpone

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, *Volpone*, makes the intriguing point that once Volpone escapes from the narrow world of his bedroom-theatre his disguises represent an increasing diminution in status, ending in the restricted role of a *commendatore* in the courtroom scenes.



has to move beyond the safe boundary of his personal threshold in order to stage ever more lavish productions.

Alexander Leggatt has argued that the de-energizing effect of perpetual repetition and enactment pervades Volpone's understanding of his own sexuality;<sup>22</sup> ordinary copulation no longer provides sufficient excitement and the attempted seduction/rape (and the slippage is significant) is the result of this state of affairs. Volpone is courting a sense of the uncertain, of the improvisatory, in an infinitely rehearsed lifestyle. The allure for him lies in the uncertainty of Celia's responses.

The role of Celia and her responses necessarily prompts a consideration of gender in Jonson's canon. She is the antithesis of Volpone's manipulable male characters: the Other, his desire for whom he cannot truly, or effectively, rationalize. This is why her appearance at the window quite literally takes his breath (and his potential for action?) away: hers is a 'timely grace' (II.ii.252) and as Volpone astutely recognizes, 'The fight is all within me' (II.iv.7). He desires Celia sexually because she is the one matter about which he cannot be assured (we may see a similar strain of attraction in his relationship with the unpredictable Mosca - the host is as dependent upon the parasite). Mosca's effective

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander Leggatt, 'The Suicide of Volpone', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 39 (1969), 19-32.

sabotage of the “seduction” scene - he ambiguously plants Bonario in a perfect overhearing position - could be regarded as a fit of jealous pique or else a shrewd recognition that the point is less for Volpone to sleep with Celia than for the fox to achieve the excitement of the possibility of that happening.

Such postulations elide the difference not only between parasite and host but also between predator and victim in the Volpone-Celia relationship. Celia, with her handkerchief, is another improvisatory performer, as effective as Volpone on this particular Venetian stage. By according Celia a choice in the bedroom scene Jonson complicates the relationship with Volpone; Celia’s self-mutilatory suggestions of alternative punishment in that scene - ‘Sir, kill me rather: I will take down poison / Eat burning coals, do anything - ’ (III.vii.93-94) - add a further layer of complexity. Celia and Mosca are also aligned. Writing on *Othello*, another play born out of the Venetian republic, Greenblatt describes the practice of self-invention by pseudo-empathy - in creating a self we also create an Other against which to consolidate that self: Othello thus becomes “Iago’s Othello”. How far then in this scene does Volpone become “Celia’s Volpone”, or “Mosca’s Volpone” (and how far does Celia become “Volpone’s Celia”, since there is certainly a flip-side to the equation)? Volpone is reliant

upon the Others he has fashioned to secure his own unstable identity.

When the play begins Volpone's ever-active mind is already scouting around for new sources of titillation. Crucially though it is Mosca who finds these sources for him, just as he devises the entertainment for Volpone performed by Nano, Castrone, and Androgyno. If Mosca is indeed the figure who crosses all the play's thresholds, thus mediating between the different characters and locations, then it is he who is truly the equivocal threshold figure: which is why Volpone renders himself vulnerable by these gestures of self-exposure. Mosca is the script-writer who devises the fox's stratagems. He introduces Celia into the proceedings and it is therefore he who pushes Volpone effectively over the edge.

Agnew has observed that the personal transgression of social boundaries invariably involved the multiplication of identities in some way. This is certainly true for Volpone but also renders the act of crossing the threshold of his own front door and into the Venetian community a dangerous one. Such an entrance into heterogeneity threatened the integrity of any individual and Volpone as an oligarch in disguise, as Scoto of Mantua, certainly compromises himself in this fashion.

The dangers of protean identity become even more self-evident in the later courtroom scenes where Volpone virtually

stages his resurrection. The house to street trajectory is then a significant one in the play for many of the characters - Celia at the window throwing her handkerchief into the world of social interaction, Mosca playing the *magnifico*, Volpone's release of his "bastard" housemates.

In *Volpone* such thresholds are seemingly constantly sought out. Citizens seek access to other citizens' abodes and Volpone's desire to enter Celia's house after sighting her at a window is indicative of the general desire for penetration, social and sexual.

An interesting question in this play is whether the inside or the outside is what ultimately betrays Volpone. In a simple reading of the play's architectural structure it would seem that it is in crossing his own front door that Volpone exceeds his narrow, personal threshold; the Scoto scene renders his disguises more public and therefore more vulnerable, more exposed.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is also a strong case for saying that Volpone, as a performer, is utterly dependent upon exposure of this nature and that to remain permanently inside would constitute his own suffocation.

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<sup>23</sup> Ian Donaldson, 'Jonson's Tortoise', in *Jonson: Volpone: A Casebook*, ed. by Jonas A. Barish (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 189-94, suggests that 'The theme of keeping to one's home is played over in many ways throughout *Volpone*' (p. 193). The article examines the emblematic significance of Sir Pol's tortoise-shell disguise in V.iv. and suggests it provides a counterpoint to Volpone's 'uncasing' in the text. Pol turns inwards to read his own entrails having previously been a surface reader of the details around him; Volpone's egotism is held accountable to the Venetian republic.

Possibly what Volpone constantly seeks is an audience. Elsewhere in the play we see Celia's incarceration in her sadistic husband's house; she too looks to the outside for release in her own performance with the handkerchief at the window during the Scoto scene (a gesture surely intended to be read by the crowd?).<sup>24</sup>

The two trial scenes of *Volpone* are another inside location with a pre-arranged audience and there the fox is once again driven, seemingly by internal desire, to expose himself; unable to stop at the one trial, greedy as he is for a second attempt, for more, for an excess of action, despite Mosca's sound advice after the first:

We must, here, be fixed;  
Here we must rest; this is our masterpiece:  
We cannot think, to go beyond this.  
(V.ii.12-14)

Volpone cannot rest still, a fact announced in his statement that 'Good wits are greatest in extremities.' (V.ii.6). Such is the intense subtlety of this play that we must question whether Mosca does not deliberately tempt the eminently-persuadable Volpone onto further exposure by this seemingly restrictive statement, just as he deliberately exposes the Celia scenes to Bonario.

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<sup>24</sup> It was standard practice at Venetian *festa* to display banners at household windows; Celia is then making a social, participatory gesture from her imprisoned position. The relevance of this for issues of gender are self-evident.

Conscious theatricality is an important constituent of the Mosca-Volpone relationship and also of the Scoto of Mantua scenes at II.ii. The only prose scene amidst a wealth of vertiginous verse, this is where Volpone performs the part of Dr. Scoto of Mantua the mountebank in the streets.<sup>25</sup> Scoto had been the leader of a Mantuan *commedia* troupe which had performed for Elizabeth I in 1576. His name had also become a by-word for conjuring tricks and deceptions so once again Volpone is teetering dangerously close to the edge in electing the signs and signifiers for his disguises that he does: it is almost as if the excitement lies in the risk of being found out. The *commedia* connections are significant; it is an improvised form of street theatre, still linked to the Venice *carnevale* today. Carnival is a time when boundaries are temporarily collapsed and disguises donned and Volpone indulges in carnivalesque behaviour of this kind. Early modern Venice apparently opposed many *commedia* troupes due to their subversive potential (they were frequently regarded as products of the subordinate classes), even setting spies amidst

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Anderson examines the proximity of performance styles and space between *commedia* and mountebanks in 'Making Room: Commedia and the Privatisation of the Theatre,' in *The Commedia Dell'Arte: From the Renaissance to Dario Fo*, ed. by Christopher Cairns (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), pp. 74-97.

audiences - an interesting footnote to Sir Pol and Peregrine's spectatorship of the Scoto scene.<sup>26</sup>

Mantua too is important. If Venice was inescapably in the Renaissance '*La repubblica*' then Mantua was under the quasi-monarchical rule of the Gonzaga family. Volpone is assuming the garb of an outsider, furthering the sense of his own liminality in Venetian society. Pol and his wife are interlopers of another kind, from England, unable either to converse in Italian or to understand Venetian customs. Peregrine's name signals that he too is a foreigner, not only a bird, but a traveller, wanderer, or an alien, according to the term's Latin etymology (to perigrinate is to travel).

Early modern audiences were also English travellers to Venice, albeit in their imaginations. Jonson deliberately exploits both familiarity and distance on the part of audiences. Topical in-jokes (such as on the death of Stone the fool and the Wotton parody) are made, but new, and foreign, words and names abound and we are constantly made aware (often painfully aware) of being an audience and that the nature of our reception and response is crucial to the play. The collective constitution

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<sup>26</sup> See Siro Ferrone, 'La vendita del teatro: Tipologie Europee tra cinque e seicento', in Cairns, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 35-73, which makes the point that theatre licences were often granted as a means of spying on the movement of foreigners since not only did they often comprise the performing troupes but a large proportion of the audiences. Government agents were thus able to act as regular paying spectators.

provides a legal and political analogue to the collective production that constitutes the dramatic text. The Venetian republic provides in essence a geographical and dramatic vehicle for contemporary political debate over republicanism but also for experimentation with dramatic conventions.

A city constantly gesturing towards self-definition is inherently theatrical. There is indeed a trick of state afoot in *Volpone*, a *raison d'être* for its locale and plot strategies. Lady Would-be's attempted seduction of Volpone by cataloguing her bibliography may not be so far off the mark as it at first seems since politically and dramatically Jonson himself may have been seduced by Florio's library of texts on the watery republic. He saw the dramatic potential inherent in the decadent and decaying city and in its constitutions. Historians such as John Hale and Innocenzo Cervelli have always maintained that the myth of Venice was recognized as just that - as a piece of propaganda, a social construct.<sup>27</sup> The city's political realities lay elsewhere; in the self-conscious projections of the Doge; in the secret sessions of the Council of Ten where reputations and lives were frequently denounced. Ultimately for Jonson any truly republican realities rested in the shifting container that was the written word and

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<sup>27</sup> See J.R. Hale, ed., *Renaissance Venice* (London: Faber, 1973), and Innocenzo Cervelli, *Machiavelli e la crisi dello stato veneziano* (Naples: Guido Editore, 1974).



that is where the republicanism of *Volpone* truly exists. In the play and in the theatre, Volpone the fox turns away from his sentencers (republican and accurate though they are) to plead for the audience's support and applause: applause which is invariably given. Like Prospero, Volpone is allowed to escape incarceration on the island of republican discipline by the nature of the theatrical contract - infinitely tolerant and equitable. He is allowed to transgress another boundary, that of the stage, and to blur the limits even of the theatrical experience.

## CHAPTER SIX: PERFORMING ALCHEMY: REPUBLICANISM AND THEATRE

### I: 'A republic of wholesale merchants'

Describing the evolution of the city-state in the early modern period, Richard Mackenney has observed that:

London could scarcely claim to be a city-state, for it was the seat of a monarchy which in the early seventeenth century aspired to govern by divine right. However, as late as 1617, a Venetian observer - who could be expected to know what a republic was - described the city as 'a sort of republic of wholesale merchants.'<sup>1</sup>

The Venetian observer quoted was speaking just seven years after Ben Jonson wrote *The Alchemist* and unwittingly captures the essence of that play and the central role within it of the London city location.

*The Alchemist* is set in the Blackfriars region of London, that is in the so-called area of the 'Liberties', part of the city and yet on its very margins, and therefore outside the strict jurisdiction of the London sheriffs. The theatres were at this time all grouped together in that area, with all its attendant notions of licence and licentiousness. Steven Mullaney sees this in a textual light:

The Liberties of the City were social and civic margins, and they also served as margins in a textual sense; as places reserved for a "variety of sense" . . . and for divergent points of view - for commentary upon and even contradiction of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mackenney, pp. 28-29.

main body of their text, which in this instance would be the body politic itself.<sup>2</sup>

If we consider the structure of Jonson's self-stellifying 1616 Folio<sup>3</sup> which, despite by its very nature emphasizing personal authorship, acknowledged in its copious marginalia issues of influence and questions of source, we can see that Jonson was a writer more than alert to such ideas; indeed he was dramatically exploitative of them and the egalitarian and metadramatic aspects of *The Alchemist* are a reflection of this.

Discussing what he describes as 'the inscription of ideological values on civic space,' Mullaney discusses how 'the margins of the city were themselves a crucial part of its symbolic economy, . . . they served as a more ambivalent staging-ground, as a place where the contradictions of the community - its incontinent hopes, fears, and desires - were prominently and dramatically set on stage.'<sup>4</sup> In its elected vocabulary this statement implicitly conjures up the world we see created onstage in *The Alchemist* : the setting of the Blackfriars house, its careful location in recognizable London streets, the divergent dreams and desires of

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: Licence, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Brady, 'Noe Fault but Life'.

<sup>4</sup> Mullaney, p. viii.

the visitors to the establishment of Subtle, Face, and Dol - in short, Lovewit's house. The play concerns itself with the differences within this collectivity, its disparate desires, and its contradictions - and in its linguistic *mélange* its contra-dictions.

The suburban location is significant. It establishes the profession of the alchemists as somehow marginal to the orthodox, authorized, civic and cultural pursuits; it marginalizes both the setting of the play and its status in the community. This had also been the intention and effect in the Middle Ages of Geoffrey Chaucer's text on alchemy, *The Canon Yeoman's Tale*. There, the Yeoman resides with his ecclesiastical master in an area of London suggestive of his second career as a pseudo-alchemist and trickster:

"In the suburbes of a toun" quod he,  
 "Lurkyng in hernes[*corners*] and in lanes blynde,  
 Whereas thise robbours and thise theves by kynde  
 Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,  
 As they that dar nat shewen hir presence;  
 So faren we, if I shal seye the sothe."<sup>5</sup>

The alchemical laboratory in the suburbs is socially and culturally significant not solely due to its inhabitants but due also to its visitants, not least the plague itself which in 1610, the date of *The Alchemist's* composition and setting, had been raging around the vastly overpopulated streets that made up early

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Prologue to The Canon Yeoman's Tale*, in *Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), ll.657-62.

modern London. The statistical evidence of London's size and demographics has been well-documented elsewhere but it is worth stating that the influx of people of diverse trades and backgrounds to the capital in the early years of the seventeenth century is reflected in the *dramatis personae* of this play.

The sociologist Richard Sennett has proffered multiple definitions of a city: as a settlement where strangers are likely to meet, where the problem of a public audience always exists, where few have a notion of each other's history or background, and where, therefore, the immediate frame of the moment is what they must base belief upon.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons city culture is dependent upon public enactment and interpretation, and the temptation to falsify and conceal is omni-present. The theatrical analogies here are self-evident and highly relevant for the cross-section of society in *The Alchemist*. It is now a critical commonplace to say that this play above all others in the Jonsonian canon proffers representations of London and theatre, and of London as theatre. The seminal essay on this subject is Robert Smallwood's, which depicts the accuracy of the location detailed in the play as a partial parody of the trend for such topicality in contemporary theatre:

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Man* (London: Faber, 1986).

Plays which pandered to (or in satirical specimens of the genre, mocked) the local patriotism and class-consciousness of their audiences were a natural development from the history plays of the previous decade which had flattered national patriotism and race consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Smallwood sees *The Alchemist* and Jonson's earlier collaborative text *Eastward Ho* (1605) as examples of the satirical strain.

Recent research on the history plays of the 1590s has suggested their proximity in concern to the city comedies; both are theatrical representations of the new market-exchange.<sup>8</sup>

In his innovative work on the relationship between the theatre and the market, Jean-Christophe Agnew suggests that:

The theater not only mirrored new social relations within the visible framework of the old, it improvised - as a matter of its own constitutive conventions - a new social contract between itself and its audiences and a new set of conditions for the suspension of disbelief that became over time the preconditions of most modern drama.<sup>9</sup>

He continues, significantly enough for *The Alchemist*, 'the stage then furnished its urban audience with a laboratory and an idiom within which these difficulties and contradictions could be acted

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Smallwood, ' "Here in the Friars": Immediacy and Theatricality in *The Alchemist* ', *Review of English Studies*, 32 (1981), 142-60 (p. 142).

<sup>8</sup> Some excellent recent research has begun to blur the previously distinct boundary line between 1590s history plays and early Jacobean city comedies. The nascent capitalism of the latter is becoming traceable in the former. My thanks to Tom Healy and to Chris Pye for discussions on this issue; see Thomas Healy, 'Remembering with Advantage: Nation and Ideology in *Henry V* ', forthcoming in *Shakespeare and the New Europe*, ed. by Michael Hattaway and Derek Roper (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), and Christopher Pye, 'The Theater, the Market, and the Subject of History', unpublished article.

<sup>9</sup> Agnew, p. 11.

out.’<sup>10</sup> By the end of the play we realize that the laboratory itself has been a product of our personal suspension of disbelief when Lovewit describes the actuality behind his front door:

Here I find  
The empty walls, worse than I left 'em, smoked,  
A few cracked pots, and glasses, and a furnace,  
The ceiling filled with poesies o'the candle;  
And 'Madam with a dildo', writ o' the walls.  
(*The Alchemist*, V.v.38-42)<sup>11</sup>

The play's "realism" is itself a consequence of dissemblance; the real communal act of *The Alchemist* is an imaginative one.

The unities of time and place are preserved to a remarkable extent in *The Alchemist*: the play's duration mirrors that of the plot's chronology and all the characters are envisaged as inhabitants of the immediate Blackfriars area; that site was not only that of the theatre in which Jonson's play was first commissioned and performed, but also the address of the dramatist himself (at least for a time) as we know from the dedicatory epistle to *Volpone* (1606). *The Alchemist's* topicality was a tactic Jonson was to repeat to similar effect in *Bartholomew Fair*.

Many critics have noted how Jonson's meticulous attention to topical details implicated the original audiences both as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Unless stated otherwise all play quotations in this chapter are from *The Alchemist*.

Londoners and paying clients; Jeremy's epilogue is usually quoted in this respect:

though I am clean  
 Got off, from Subtle, Surly, Mammon, Dol,  
 Hot Ananias, Dapper, Druggier, all  
 With whom I traded; yet I put myself  
 On you, that are my country: and this pelf,  
 Which I have got, if you do quit me, rests  
 To feast you often, and invite new guests.  
 (V.v.159-65)

Certainly in the 1991-92 Royal Shakespeare Company production<sup>12</sup> this idea was registered to great effect when the named characters of this address stood silently facing out into the lit Barbican auditorium with an artist's impression of early modern London placed behind them. However the alignment of audience and cast, framed and highlighted though they are by the Prologue and Epilogue of this carefully structured play ('Our scene is London, 'cause we would make known, / No country's mirth is better than our own.' (Prologue, ll.5-6)) should not blind us to the careful individualizations and demarcations which operate within the *dramatis personae*. This is very much a community with all its attendant tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, and in his localized setting Jonson makes perhaps his most egalitarian (republican?) dramatic gesture.

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<sup>12</sup> Directed by Sam Mendes and starring David Bradley as Subtle, Jonathan Hyde as Face, and Joanne Pearce as Dol Common. Opened at The Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1991.



## II: The mixed state of Subtle, Face, and Dol

By the 1590s, London, which had previously been zoned into different occupational ghettos, was witnessing a breakdown of its divisional boundaries. In *The Alchemist* we have a whole blend of pursuits in coexistence, although it is interesting to note that the sustainability of the alchemist's trick is dependent upon the prevention of these strangers' paths ever crossing. As one character enters another is invariably hurried offstage, in a theatrical style now suggestive of the farce genre with its constantly opening and closing doors as signifiers of plot advancement. When the strangers do eventually meet and swap stories then the charade visibly collapses, as in Act V when the clients all gather around the locked door to Lovewit's abode.

Even though Dapper the clerk's character and particular section of the tale are based on the real experiences of one Thomas Rodgers, neither he, nor Abel Drugger the grocer, constitute cultural stereotypes. Drugger is scarcely the financially-consumed mercantilist elsewhere evident in early modern popular drama; with his gentle request for advice on the positioning of the shelves in his store he presents an almost sweet visage for nascent capitalism.

If the individual portraits of the play are highly localized, it is also worth considering how local loyalties affected audience response. Like the contemporary audiences, Jonson's characters are mostly Londoners - including Subtle, Face, and Dol. Sir Epicure Mammon is a gullible outsider, a knight of the shires, as too are Kastril and his sister Dame Pliant (her name perhaps indicating her susceptibility to her new environment). Somewhat ironically Kastril is probably the richest individual in the play. That fact succeeds in undermining any sense of Lovewit's ultimate control through dint of his age and possessions in Act V, since the success/failure of everything effectively hinges on Kastril's acceptance of Lovewit's suit for his sister-widow's hand.

The *dramatis personae* refers to both the female characters of the play (there are only two) as male possessions; Pliant is Kastril's sister and Dol Common is Subtle and Face's colleague (already we are given the hint that Dol is not an entirely equal partner in the supposedly joint-stock company). Dol is highly subject to male readings of her nature. The Blackfriars community begins to look distinctly patriarchal from these angles, casting considerable doubt on any republican claims that it might make.

Both Subtle and Face seem anxious to attach various possessive epithets to Dol Common; so much so that an audience

may begin to wonder whether she is the goods held in common by their partnership:

SUBTLE	Royal Doll!
FACE	Spoken like Claridiana, and thyself! For which, at supper, thou shalt sit in triumph, And not be styled Dol Common, but Dol Proper, Dol Singular: the longest cut, at night, Shall draw thee for his Dol Particular. (I.i.174-79)

Dol's profession as a prostitute does render her a common thing in their eyes; her body can be purchased and possessed by anyone with the necessary capital.<sup>13</sup> She is indeed the republican epitome of a 'public thing', the *res publica*: she says famously at I.i.110, 'Have yet some care of me, o'your republic.' Essentially though Dol is defined by the imperialist and patriarchal strategy of naming (Adam, not Eve, named things in Eden; Columbus re-named his New World "discoveries"<sup>14</sup>). That a woman should be so obviously denigrated by the joint-stock company's male membership (and that I have already referred to Subtle and Face as a 'partnership' is an indication of the dichotomies present) is something which is signified from the start in Dol's nomenclature. Like Pecunia, her aristocratic counterpart in *The Staple of News*, Dol is vulnerable to the allegorizations and interpretations of the

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<sup>13</sup> Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*, somewhat unfairly sees her as a brutalized and virilized capitalist who is more successful in the "male" business world than the men themselves.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). My thanks to Stephen Greenblatt for reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

men around her. For Sir Epicure Mammon she is the focus of his sexual ambitions; he may promise her a 'free state' but the offer is couched in the language of sexual and patriarchal absolutism. The few times that Dol is allowed to play characters above her station - the mad lady citing Broughton, the Faery Queen in the display for Dapper - it is made very clear that she is only 'playing', that such theatre poses no real threat to the social hierarchy. Any subversion implicit in the assumption of such roles is cynically undercut by Face's observation:

Why, this is yet  
A kind of modern happiness, to have  
Dol Common for a great lady.  
(IV.i.22-24)

as indeed it has been previously by Dol's collusion, admittedly for the purposes of a quiet life, in these male readings:

Oh, let me alone.  
I'll not forget my race, I warrant you.  
I'll keep my distance, laugh, and talk aloud;  
Have all the tricks of a proud scurvy lady,  
And be as rude as her woman.  
(II.iv.7-11)

The fate of women being both constructed and performed by men in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre is perfectly captured here. In a manner little different from Dame Pliant, Dol is conveniently (for the men at least) offered to the most suitable male of the moment. Face shows little care of her in this and his almost casual offer (although Face does nothing wantonly in this play - whilst seeming to; that is his art) to recommend her to a

brothel at the end seems particularly chilling. Dol is the ultimate victim in the male drama of double standards.<sup>15</sup>

To all intents and purposes Dol is Face's 'fond, flexible whore' and yet it is she who has many of the 'good thoughts' of the play. She makes perhaps the most astute, certainly the most accurate, observations of the play; she predicts, in an extraordinarily prescient statement for 1610, civil war between Subtle and Face. She also warns Mammon of the dangers of his dreaming in an absolutist state, albeit initially altruistic and democratic in its aims:

I could well consent, sir.  
But, in a monarchy, how will this be?  
The Prince will soon take notice; and both seize  
You and your stone; it being a wealth unfit  
For any private subject.  
(IV.i.146-50)

As Dol Common she is also representative of the populace, the plebeian element of this oligarchical republic, the *stato misto*. To her falls the role of mediator or peacemaker during the opening squabble between Face and Subtle, 'Gentlemen, what mean you? / Will you mar all?' (I.i.80-81). She reminds the over-

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<sup>15</sup> The words of Moll Cutpurse in Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* are worth recording here:

Thou'rt one of those  
That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore:  
If she but cast a liberal eye upon thee,  
Turn back her head, she's thine; . . .  
How many of our sex by such as thou  
Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name  
That never deserved loosely nor did trip  
In path of whoredom beyond cup and lip.

(*The Roaring Girl*, II.i.72-75, 81-84, ed. by Paul A. Mulholland (Manchester: Manchester University Press (Revels), 1987)).

presumptuous Subtle of the democratic intentions of their republic:

You will insult,  
And claim a primacy in the divisions?  
You must be chief? As if you, only, had  
The powder to project with, and the work  
Were not begun out of equality?  
The venture tripartite? All things in common?  
Without priority?  
(I.i.130-36)

The powder she refers to is that used in the alchemical experiments but the word again emphasizes the theatrical aspect of their joint enterprise. The notion of a 'project' is quasi-theatrical (think of Prospero's masque-project in *The Tempest*) but it is also the language of monopolies. The democratic aspect of the venture has been called into question from the outset, not least in light of the terms of deference Dol applies to her male colleagues: 'Sovereign' (Subtle) and 'General' (Face): Burt has suggested that the professionalization of the early modern theatre created an atmosphere in which joint-stock companies became little more than personal monopolies.<sup>16</sup> A social hierarchy operates in this city-state and Dol envisages all too clearly, with a Machiavellian notion of the inbuilt decay of all political institutions, that the senators themselves will be the downfall of this republic: 'Will you be / Your own destructions, gentlemen?' (I.i.104-05). This republic is visibly disintegrating when the play

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<sup>16</sup> Burt, *Licensed by Authority*, p. 92.

commences; Dol asks, 'Do not we / Sustain our parts?' (I.i.144-45), only to be told by Subtle, 'Yes, but they are not equal.' (I.i.145).

The theatrical metaphor persists: 'Why, if your part exceed today, I hope / Ours may, tomorrow, match it.' (I.i.146-47).

Dol knows the consequences of absolutism. She may warn Mammon of the perils of his free-state ruminations but for her the threat is contained in the all-too visible signs of state authority in seventeenth-century London: the stocks, the scaffolds, and the gibbets of the hangman:

Rascals,  
Would run themselves from breath to see me ride,  
Or you t'have but a hole, to thrust your heads in,  
For which you should pay ear-rent? No, agree.  
And may Don Provost ride a-feasting, long,  
In his old velvet jerkin, and stained scarfs  
(My noble Sovereign, and worthy General)  
Ere we contribute a new crewel garter  
To his most worsted worship.  
(I.i.166-74)

It is apt that Dol, who has fretted from the beginning that the master of the house might return and 'mar all', or that the neighbours might discover 'all', should be the one to announce that very occurrence in Act V.

In announcing Lovewit's return, Dol appears once again to be looking to her male counterparts to seize the initiative; in reality, this 'venture tripartite' functions in more two-dimensional fashion. Behind it lies, I believe, the image of the classical triple political alliance of the Ancient Roman Triumvirate: of Mark

Antony, Octavius Caesar, and Lepidus. The inconsistencies of the Roman triple alliance, often at the expense of Lepidus, were famously depicted in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07).<sup>17</sup> In Mark Antony we have a famous general and in Octavius Caesar the future Augustus, the ruler who created the role of *Princeps* within a republican context for reasons of *necessità* (Jonson had dealt with the paradoxes of Augustan rule in his earlier play *Poetaster* (1601) and so the layers of significance increase).

*Antony and Cleopatra* is permeated by notions of theatre and politics and the inextricable relationship between the two spheres; Cleopatra is the arch-exponent of this political doctrine of role-playing. Dol too plays a number of roles, including that of a queen but, like Lepidus, Dol's participation is being undermined in real terms.

The official political triumvirate in *Antony and Cleopatra* is by no means the sole triad of the play. The ostentatious weakness of Lepidus and the resultant fictitiousness of the "triumvirate" as a three in real terms draws the attention of audiences to other "threes" in the play, including the female triad of Cleopatra's suicide (Cleopatra-Charmian-Iris) and the triad of Antony's

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<sup>17</sup> See Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea*, for a useful account of the formation and the inadequacies of the triumvirate. My thanks also to Rowland Cotterill for innumerable discussions on these themes.



political marriage (Octavius-Octavia-Antony) but also more significantly the trio of lovers (Cleopatra-Octavius-Antony). Dol in *The Alchemist* is of course Cleopatra to this play's rather prosaic and suburban Caesar and Mark Antony, in that she is the focus of both their attentions, and often for more than simply sexual reasons. Mark Antony's political status was felt to be affected by his liaison with the Egyptian Queen; in the words of Shakespeare's Enobarbus:

Take but good note, and you shall see in him  
The triple pillar of the world transform'd  
Into a strumpet's fool.  
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.i.11-13)

The use of the term 'triple' is telling: he does not represent a third but rather stands for the whole entity. Subtle and Face seek a similar political deal.

The 'Argument' clearly implies a past relationship, professional or otherwise, between Subtle and Dol, 'a cheater and his punk' (1.4). The more mercenary aspect of their relationship(s) is highlighted by the scene in which Face, seemingly unperturbed, finds Dol and Subtle kissing; the occasion merely provokes further excuse for male banter as Dol is, effectively, pushed between these competing peacocks.

Whilst Subtle may be no Mark Antony, he is nevertheless at the beginning of *The Alchemist* a kind of urban Caesar - the Sovereign of Blackfriars. The challenge to his leadership comes

from his general and right-hand man, Face. The Caesar-Antony parallel persists, especially if we see the opening quarrel as a form of post-Philippi degeneration. Subtle claims the credit for rescuing Face from his life of cobwebs and subservience “below stairs” in an act of alchemical transcendence:

Thou vermin, have I ta'en thee out of dung,  
 So poor, so wretched, when no living thing  
 Would keep thee company, but a spider, or worse?  
 Raised thee from brooms, and dust, and watering-pots?  
 Sublimed thee, and exalted thee, and fixed thee  
 I'th' third region, called our state of grace?  
 (I.i.64-69)

whereas Face is all too quick to remind Subtle of his humbler origins: the occasion for some fine Jonsonian descriptive passages:

But I shall put you in mind, sir, at Pie Corner,  
 Taking your meal of steam in, from cooks' stalls,  
 Where, like the father of Hunger, you did walk  
 Piteously costive, with your pinched-horn-nose,  
 And your complexion, of the Roman wash,  
 Struck full of black and melancholic worms,  
 Like powder corns, shot, at th'artillery yard.  
 (I.i.25-31)

Subtle may be deceiving himself in these terms, as Face implies, but the butler may be cozening himself in the attack. For Subtle's knowledge of the alchemical profession seems somehow more than superficial in a play where so much is dependent upon surface appearance. He demonstrates an acute understanding of alchemical discourse, rendering him perhaps the more likely counterpart of John Dee, the then recently deceased conjuror and government agent, than the traditional trickster figure (although

these elements clearly coincide in Subtle's character).<sup>18</sup> His jargon is accurate and whilst the persona of alchemist can only remain an enigma to audiences the possibility that he is a knowledgeable practitioner and no mere charlatan should not be dismissed. If Jonson's Epigram # 6 is to be received at face value then the dramatist held no belief in the alchemical profession: 'If all you boast of your great act be true / Sure, willing poverty lives most in you.' (ll.1-2) yet, as Jonson's masque *Mercury Vindicated From the Alchemists at Court* (1616) indicates in its title, the alchemical discourse was one that had been appropriated by the ruling elite and Jonson would have had access to it in this guise.<sup>19</sup> Through the patronage of the Sidney circle, Jonson would also have had access to John Dee himself. Dee was chemistry tutor to the young Sir Philip Sidney and an impressive intellectual figure with the finest library in Elizabethan England - the volumes stretched from scientific texts, through neo-platonism, to classical drama, and far exceeded the collections of Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

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<sup>18</sup> See Peter J. French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), and Barbara Howard Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984). Face was often likened to another actual conjuror, Edward Kelley. For suggestions of links with the Sidney circle raised also in French, see Lyndy Abraham, *Marvell and Alchemy* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1990). A recent Cambridge University PhD by William Sherman sought to retrieve the notion of Dee as a government agent. My thanks to him for his advice on this matter.

<sup>19</sup> See Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*.

The library was open to - and used by - numerous scholars of the day and it is unlikely that someone of such bibliographical bent as Jonson could have avoided the temptation to indulge. Subtle's readings may then be a little more grounded in reality than critics have heretofore chosen to acknowledge (his characterization is indeed complex and subtle as his nomenclature suggests), although recent productions have admittedly all adhered to the comic charlatan theory. The explosion of Act IV.v. is nevertheless timed to precision (both by Subtle and the dramatist), suggesting at the very least a detailed understanding of the substances at work in the chemical laboratory.

The perfectly synchronized experiment is a further example of the theatrical awareness of Subtle and Face. What is remarkable about their volatile relationship is that in public, in performance, it coheres perfectly. The querulous opening scene might even be that of two lead actors battling over the spotlight; we enter in the midst of a bitterly-contested debate over primacy in the action. It may also constitute an egotistical clash over who should perform the roles of stage manager and director - and that distinction is crucial for the theatre's own social hierarchy.

### III: You get what you p(r)ay for: the Blackfriars community

The traditional perception of touring acting companies as little more than vagrants has been well documented;<sup>20</sup> city authorities feared they might encourage disorder and this fear was embodied in various acts of prohibition and censorship. Theatre's impact on society was often regarded as being akin to contagion or an epidemic, an image given a frighteningly real dimension with the numerous outbreaks of plague in this period. These outbreaks necessitated the closure of the playhouses which, as densely populated buildings, increased the risk of infection and therefore the rapid spread of disease.

This particular touring company seeks a more permanent theatrical base for its shows and discovers the perfect venue in the form of Lovewit's plague-vacated London residence. This house of course happens to be in the Blackfriars region of the city, the area of the Liberties where the permanent playhouses were also located. This is a joint-stock company of actor-sharers, able as Face says (I.i.185-188) to take a fortnight's break without falling apart.

This joint-stock acting company is popular; they attract a large cross-section of London society to their door. This notion of

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Mann, *The Elizabethan Player*.

a target population for their activities is deliberately wide in its application and could even be a reference to the socially representative *dramatis personae* of the play. It could also refer to the audience in the theatre watching any given performance of *The Alchemist*. Smallwood stresses the deliberate collapse of real and fictive boundaries in this play, effected especially by the contemporaneous Blackfriars staging.

Whilst there are a great number of 'illusion breaking remarks' (the phrase is Smallwood's) of the kind so expertly explored by Anne Richter(Barton) in *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* <sup>21</sup> (for example, the references to cues and costumes, and to the borrowing of a Spanish disguise from a recent production of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* <sup>22</sup>), the overriding sense is of something more complex than mere theatrical self-consciousness in operation.

Steven Mullaney has described the theatrical rehearsal as:

a period of free-play during which alternatives can be staged, unfamiliar roles tried out, the range of one's power to convince or persuade explored with some license; it is a period of performance, but one in which the customary demands of

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<sup>21</sup> Anne Richter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

<sup>22</sup> Jonson had himself acted in this play and was commissioned by Philip Henslowe to write additions to it for the Rose theatre, adding to the metatheatricality; see Carol Chillington Rutter, ed., *Documents of the Rose Playhouse* (Manchester: Manchester University Press (Revels), 1984), and Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

decorum are suspended, along with the expectations of final or perfected form.<sup>23</sup>

The sense of a rehearsal dominates when *The Alchemist* opens with Subtle and Face in mid-argument. The feeling is almost that we have invaded a tense rehearsal situation where the lead actors are clashing over egotistical and artistic desires which have possibly been held delicately in check until this very moment. There is an element of display and a testing of linguistic skill on both men's behalf. The partnership of Face and Subtle coheres with stunning effect before its various audiences; indeed it seems almost to thrive on account of this strategy of clashing. As soon as Dapper enters the scene the bitter wrangling seems to disappear, as completely as their personal histories have been obliterated, for anyone but themselves, beneath the new guises of the Alchemist and his Captain.

For all their arguments, Face and Subtle clearly lay considerable store by their partnership, or rather they have to, since in a strange way each is reliant upon the other. In acting terms, these two performers have to spend a remarkable percentage of play-time onstage and, even more significantly, together. Their lines spin off from one another; their exits and entrances are dependent upon each other's cues, and their timing

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<sup>23</sup> Mullaney, p. 69.

is a matter of implicit trust with all the door-openings and disguises which the plot entails. A knowledge of the script-learning methods of early modern theatre, for which we do have extant documentary evidence, where actors were given prompt-books containing just their own lines and their cues, with no coherent or complete rendition of each scene, enhances this idea of the lead actors' mutual dependency. In this play without the ability of these two actors to work off each other the alchemical scheme and indeed the entire drama would collapse; their relationship offers a kind of metaphor for performance.<sup>24</sup> For the actors involved, Subtle and Face's shared scenes necessitate lengthy joint rehearsal periods and possibly the eventuality of the kinds of stresses and strains witnessed exploding in the first scene. In areas of blocking, line-learning, and timing these two men are undoubtedly in each other's hands. That is what makes the "shaving scene", never actually viewed onstage, so crucial for a full understanding of the Subtle-Face rapport. When the proverbial chips are down, there is no other choice but to rally together this one last time, resulting most visibly in the chicanery of the Dapper-Faery Queen display (their last big show) but also in

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<sup>24</sup> In the 1991-92 RSC season it is interesting that Subtle (David Bradley) and Face (Jonathan Hyde) were again paired as lead actors in the company's production of *Julius Caesar*; the playing of the republican brothers requiring as it does a similar joint rehearsal period and demonstration of theatrical trust.



the more personal (and private - a rare thing in this play where what we witness is what is truly relevant) dressing-room exchange where Subtle is required to shave the bearded Face and return him to the persona of Jeremy the butler. The sense of risk however remains:

FACE	All my Captain's beard Must off, to make me appear smooth Jeremy. You'll do't?
SUBTLE	Yes, I'll shave you, as well as I can.
FACE	And not cut my throat, but trim me?
SUBTLE	You shall see, sir. (IV.vii.130-33)

That potential-filled point of punctuation before 'as well as I can' maintains the notion of the improvised and director Sam Mendes could not resist his Jeremy in the 1991-92 RSC production appearing with a sticking plaster over a small nick on his chin. Jeremy's reliance on Subtle is risky, but it is a reliance nevertheless (for the maintenance or discarding of the persona of Face anyhow - saving Face?), despite the defiance and expressed autonomy of the opening scene.

Homogenizing though the effects of performance are for this company, there is also the indisputable sense that once that performance is set in motion a degree of control is sacrificed. Complete control is now qualified by the potential for audience interpretations; the clients provide various reasons why Face, Subtle, and Dol must think on their feet. The analogy with the authorial position is clear; Jonson too in any performance

sacrifices, both to the audiences and to the performers, part of his ability to determine the meaning and outcome of his plays. The contradictions of Jonson's authorial stance are crystallized in this matter; the tyrannical democracy of the Jonsonian drama is embodied in the contradictions of *The Alchemist*.

Dol it is who is most frightened by the judgmental audience throughout the high-pitched opening scene. Several times she attempts to quieten her male colleagues for fear they might be overheard:

Will you have  
The neighbours hear you? Will you betray all?  
Hark, I hear somebody.  
(I.i.7-9)

In Act V we will learn that the neighbours have indeed heard everything and, as if to reinforce the points made in the previous paragraph, produced their own variant readings of the situation.

If the very fact of the play's theatricality is contained in its vehement denial of the same, then so is the ending of this play contained in its beginning. In a play so dependent for its impact upon audiences, upon reactions of surprise, and a predominant sense of chance and improvisation, there is also a remarkable sense of inevitability - not least about the neighbours' remarks, and the master's return - despite Face's assurances that they should 'fear not him': 'While there dies one a week, / O'th' plague, he's safe, from thinking towards London ' (I.i.182-83).

There is a battle for authority between Subtle and Face. Both claim ultimate responsibility and credit for having dreamed up and organized the alchemical scheme. Both therefore demand a larger cut of the spoils (or their name first on the credits - by naming his play after Subtle, Jonson exploits our automatic tendency to assign a lead role; the same thing is true of *Volpone*). The careful balance between the organized and the impromptu in this play - its “organized chaos” - highlights the need in any theatrical community for a decision-maker, however collective the activity, and however communal the intentions or results.

Another battle for authority stems from the play’s two Anabaptists. Jonson’s careful demarcation of this pair is rarely explicated; he is not offering a generic portrait - just as Drugger is no stereotypical grocer, neither are Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias Puritan stereotypes. The specificity of their faith as Anabaptists (an extreme wing of Puritanism) has already been emphasized. Tribulation is undoubtedly the more worldly of the two; in many respects, with his practical politics, he represents a potential rival to Face and Subtle’s schemes. He is the one character who sets out from the very start to cozen the cozeners, although Pertinax Surly soon follows suit.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> This subtle distinction is often lost in performance since directors recognize humorous potential in the twinning of the religious fanatics; in addition, Tribulation’s role in terms of lines spoken and time present

The best directors are those who allow the actors to reach their own decisions. The conscious evasiveness of the control figure is a fascinating one and has its political paradigms, not least in Machiavelli's guideline to being a pragmatic prince. In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*, entitled 'How princes should honour their word', he stresses how 'one must know how to colour one's actions and to be a great liar and deceiver. Men are so simple, and so much creatures of circumstance, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived.'<sup>26</sup> The Machiavellian notion of behind-the-scenes control seems to constitute Tribulation's less-than-wholesome working theory: the less you are visibly enacting control, the more likely it is you will achieve the very depth of power that you seek.

Ananias is by comparison extremist and exclusivist in his attitudes, battling to come to terms with his more prosaic and pragmatic pastor:

TRIBULATION	Good brother, we must bend unto all means,
ANANIAS	That may give furtherance to the holy cause. Which his cannot: the sanctified cause Should have a sanctified course.

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onstage is relatively small, certainly by comparison with the cozeners.

<sup>26</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and introduced by George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961; repr. 1981). The edition of *The Prince*, ed. by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) elects to translate '*principe*' as 'ruler' which gives a greater sense of the political subtlety of the text. I have used the Penguin translations of Machiavelli throughout for ease of access.

TRIBULATION

Not always necessary,  
 The children of perdition are, oftentimes,  
 Made instruments even of the greatest works.  
 Beside, we should give somewhat to man's nature,  
 The place he lives in, still about the fire,  
 And fume of metals, that intoxicate  
 The brain of man, and make him prone to  
 passion.  
 (III.i.11-20)

The fire of Lovewit's house is more literal than theological hellfire; it is the furnace of the clients' imaginations that Subtle and Face so politicly fan. They fully comprehend the naiveté of the populace and how 'The common people are always impressed by appearances and results.'<sup>27</sup> Both Face and Subtle possess the qualities of rule, both are certainly fine actors, but as the play progresses it becomes increasingly clear that whilst Subtle is more obviously performing for their public, it is Face who is engineering events.

It seems that leadership can never be successfully shared by Face and Subtle in a truly co-operative venture; instead, one or the other must at any given moment dominate (and both must always dominate Dol). Jonson's theatrical ambitions were somewhat akin; his printing of the 1616 Folio proved that he did not freely relinquish texts into the public, pluralist domain and yet he positively welcomed audience interaction in the very structure of his drama.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

There are absolutists in *The Alchemist*, but Ben Jonson is not one of them: Tribulation Wholesome is. He demands the 'restoring of the silenced saints' (III.i.38) and dreams, with some encouragement from Subtle, of being a 'temporal lord' on earth; he silences Ananias's spiritual objections and is so set on earthly power that he will sell the orphans' goods for the purposes of achieving it, claiming that 'Casting of money may be lawful' (III.ii.153). Tribulation has a rival for supremacy though in the bulky figure of a new Jacobean knight, Sir Epicure Mammon, who has purchased his way to position and now hopes to complete his social climb by purchasing the elixir.

#### IV: The Master of the Revels: Absentee monarchs and absolutists

Sir Epicure Mammon's voluptuous mind ensures that he projects his dreams far beyond the confines of the place he inhabits, far beyond the grimy haunts of Blackfriars, towards the New World, and even the New Jerusalem. His nomenclature signals both economic and sexual consumption and his ambitions are similarly all-encompassing. Critics have abstracted Mammon into being a generic representative of knighthood, of the corrupt and hedonistic Jacobean aristocracy, and even of innate avarice. What in truth renders him so interesting in the theatre is his utter

originality, and in particular his remarkable style of speech, as voluptuous as his dreams in its use of imagery and punctuation. Jonson emphasizes this linguistic excess by coupling Mammon with the skeptical Surly who simply reduces the alchemical dream to a mere counterpart of his gaming lifestyle:

Rather, than I'll be brayed, sir, I'll believe,  
That alchemy is a pretty kind of game,  
Somewhat like the tricks o'the cards, to cheat a man  
With charming.  
(II.iii.179-82)

Mammon is, in expression at least, another absolutist, if not a monomaniac. He has an act opening at II.i. (in that he is like Tribulation Wholesome, a companion absolutist at III.i.) and mistakenly believes that this is his play (he is akin to Volpone in that). His dream is really one of possession. If capitalism was inextricably bound up with the ventures of travellers to the New World, then Mammon's dreams also make it clear that he shares with them their will and ability to cross immense distances in search of profit;<sup>28</sup> the distances he travels are entirely imaginative but the immense confidence of these travellers is something he clearly shares.

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<sup>28</sup> See Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, and for the antithesis of my argument see Harry Levin, 'Two Magian Comedies: *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist*', *ShS*, 22 (1969), 47-58, where he argues that, whereas Shakespeare's contemporaneous play takes account of New World developments, Jonson's play is firmly rooted in London; I would question the imaginative scope of this.

Alchemy appears to create a comparable sense of wonder in Mammon to that experienced and articulated by New World voyagers:

This is the utopian moment of travel; when you realize that what seems most unattainably marvelous, most deniable, is what you almost already have, what you could have - if you could only strip away the banality and corruption of the everyday . . . .<sup>29</sup>

His initial stage-entrance is vocalized in the rhetoric of sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century travel writings:

Come on, sir. Now you set your foot on shore  
In *novo orbe*: here's the rich Peru:  
And there within, sir, are the golden mines,  
Great Solomon's Ophir! He was sailing to't  
Three years, but we have reached it in ten months.  
(II.i.1-15)

The bathos of this is self-evident; the suburb of Blackfriars comes a rather poor second to Peru, as England does to the New World: 'I'll purchase Devonshire and Cornwall, / And make them perfect Indies!' (II.i.35-36).

Mammon's rituals of possession are entirely speech-enacted; he displays what Paul de Man would have termed the 'errancy of language' in his wayward hyperboles and translations of experience. Even punctuation, usually a constraining force, seems

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<sup>29</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 25. *Eastward Ho*, Jonson's collaborative text co-written with Chapman and Marston, interestingly aligns those characters with New World ambitions, such as Sir Petronel Flash, with those who claim knowledge of alchemy, such as Francis Quicksilver. The central scene of that play (III.iii.) intriguingly lifts accounts of the Elizabethan colonies and settlements in Virginia and their attendant lust for gold from Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* to expose the mercenary and morally dubious motives of characters such as Sir Petronel and Quicksilver in their attitudes to life in general, see R. W. Van Fossen's introductory essay to his Revels edition of the play (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), pp. 1-58.



excessive here.<sup>30</sup> The unnaturalness of Mammon's desire for gold is unmistakeable: the Blackfriars *conquistador* becomes increasingly consumed by the related lust.

Initially it may seem that Subtle and Face are the more likely *conquistadors* since they embroil Mammon in the 'grossly unequal gift exchange' that for Greenblatt characterizes the literature of exploration. They offer glass beads for pearls as Columbus did to the Indians. To begin with at least Mammon harbours dreams of altruism as well as possession, as Subtle details:

He has, this month, talked as he were possessed,  
And, now, he's dealing pieces on't away.  
Methinks, I see him, entering ordinaries,  
Dispensing for the pox; and plaguey-houses,  
Reaching his dose; walking Moorfields for lepers;  
And off'ring citizens' wives pomander bracelets,  
As his preservative, made of the elixir; . . .  
If his dreams last, he'll turn the age to gold.  
(I.iv.16-22, 29)

It is Mammon's original companion, Surly, who plays the absolutist:

Faith, I have a humour  
I would not willingly be gulled. Your stone  
Cannot transmute me.  
(II.i.77-79)

Increasingly however Mammon's venture becomes self-serving and self-indulgent; London begins to seem too small for his

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<sup>30</sup> In his edition of the play, in *Selected Plays* II, Martin Butler stresses his careful adherence to Jonson's punctuation of this play, as seen into print for the 1616 Folio *Workes*. I think Butler is right to stress the significance of the often complex and unusual punctuation for a fuller understanding of this playtext.

projections, despite being one of the fastest-growing European cities:

My only care is  
Where to get stuff enough now, to project on,  
This town will not half serve me.  
(II.ii.11-13)

Whilst he may claim the intention of employing his wealth in pious matters, Mammon's catalogue of good works is persistently invaded by lustful desires:

I shall employ it all, in pious uses,  
Founding of colleges, and grammar schools,  
Marrying young virgins, building hospitals,  
And now and then, a church.  
(II.iii.49-52)

Although in an admittedly rather different fashion, like Shakespeare's Gonzalo in *The Tempest*, Mammon contradicts his own quasi-republican outlines: 'The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning' (*The Tempest*, II.i.158). He effectively loses sight of everything stable in his (to use Agnew's phrase) 'fraternization with impossibilities'. His loss of control in the face of Dol's lengthy recitations from Broughton merely pre-empt his loss of control and power following the explosion of the laboratory and his hopes. In Act V we find him pleading to Surly to, 'Play not the tyrant' (V.ii.4), subjected as he is to the gamester's 'I told you so' discourse. For Mammon it has been purely a dream of possession; his absolutism has also disintegrated, his final line echoing this realization: 'What! In a

dream?" (V.v.83). He may still argue that the loss is ultimately the commonwealth's, but his free state was always one where it was envisaged he would be ruler and freeholder.

Mammon wants only gold, and he even begins to define himself as a second Jove - in doing so, aligning himself with the current monarch, James VI and I:

Now, Epicure,  
Heighten thyself, talk to her, all in gold;  
Rain her as many showers, as Jove did drops  
Unto his Danaë; show the god a miser,  
Compared with Mammon. What? The stone will do't.  
She shall feel gold, taste gold, hear gold, sleep gold:  
Nay, we will *concumbers* gold. I will be puissant,  
And mighty in my talk to her!  
(IV.i.24-31)

Mammon's choice of Ovidian myth to exemplify his point is telling. As one of James's new "mushroom" knights, his claims to status have distinctly fiscal foundations; that he should therefore choose to be Jove entering Danaë's tower as a shower of gold is entirely congruous with the driving motivations of his character - money and sex. Mammon's dreams of metamorphosis are as hopeless as the quest for the elixir; he is beguiled rather by the theatrical transformations of Subtle, Face, and Dol. In the theme of deceptive metamorphosis in the play, John S. Mebane has traced a series of parodic references to supposedly republican political values:

The theme of deceptive metamorphosis is . . . connected to Jonson's satire on Renaissance utopianism and millenarianism. As soon as he establishes the theme of false transformation and role playing he moves into the

description of the relationship between the con artists as a republic or a commonwealth. Their “venture tripartite” is a political arrangement . . . The important point is that the commonwealth the three clowns have established is ordered in accordance with the egalitarian ideals that Renaissance thinkers often associated with the lost Golden Age.<sup>31</sup>

Subtle and Face’s most dramatic metamorphosis takes place in the tradition of theatrical denouement in the final act. Act V signals a rapid turnaround not only in events but also in perspective in *The Alchemist*. Suddenly, after a continuous and almost claustrophobic indoors setting in the same room of Lovewit’s house for the first four acts, we and the play are thrust out into the cold of the Blackfriars street.<sup>32</sup> As an audience we are thus identified with the neighbours who are recounting tales of noises they have heard emanating from the house. We have heard the same; those noises constitute the dialogue of the play, although our interpretations might differ. Peter Holland has written of the careful delineation of each of these neighbours, making particular reference to the remarkable (because unremarkable) figure of neighbour six, whose highly individual voice and small personal history (‘About, / Some three weeks

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<sup>31</sup> John S. Mebane, ‘Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: Utopianism and Religious Enthusiasm in *The Alchemist*’, *RenD*, n.s. 10 (1979), pp. 128-29.

<sup>32</sup> In the theatre this can have a remarkably tangible effect - the sudden, possibly unnoticed removal of the few props required by those earlier scenes leaving an audience quite literally out in the cold, feeling the air of an empty stage. The occurrence in Sam Mendes’s 1991-92 RSC production provoked a spontaneous round of applause.

since, I heard a doleful cry, / As I sat up, a-mending my wife's stockings' (V.i.32-34)) ensure that any homogenized reading of the neighbours as a generic whole is expertly avoided by Jonson.<sup>33</sup> In acknowledging the crowd Jonson does not ignore the essential differentiations within the group.<sup>34</sup> The identification of audience and neighbours would seem a very public gesture - carrying the play into the streets and recognizing its implications for the populace; yet the device of bringing the audience into the final act and often directly onto the stage was a technique derived from Jonson's more royally-connected pursuit of masque-writing. In masques, the noble spectators often participated in the final dance or movement. This public theatre gesture towards masque structures casts Lovewit, the returning master (a figure of Plautine origin), less as the 'everyday man . . . who is the spectator of the common scene'<sup>35</sup> than as the monarch himself. James VI and I, like Lovewit, would have vacated London during times of serious epidemic; the plague having initiated and induced in

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Holland, 'The Resources of Characterization in *Othello*', *ShS*, 41 (1989), 119-32.

<sup>34</sup> This would also characterize his crowd-driven play *Bartholomew Fair* and has, I believe, mistakenly led Leo Salinger to deny the Bartholomew birds the right to the label "community" in his article, 'Crowd and Public in *Bartholomew Fair*', *RenD*, n.s. 10 (1979), 141-59.

<sup>35</sup> William W.E. Slights, 'Unfashioning the Man of Mode: A Comic Counter genre in Marston, Jonson, and Middleton', *RenD*, n.s. 15 (1984), 69-91.

Elizabethan times the “tradition” of summer country progresses when the heat meant the risk of infection in the city was at its zenith. Lovewit’s evidential concern for self-protection would seem to echo this:

FACE	The house, sir, has been visited.
LOVEWIT	What? With the plague? Stand thou then further. (V.ii.4-5)

Lovewit regards himself as something of an indulgent master; we have already explored (see Chapter Three) ways in which Jonson appeared to plead for comparable indulgence, especially towards authors, from James VI and I. If Face is the author of events, then Lovewit certainly treats him with great lenience, tolerating his role-playing and even accepting some of his material rewards, with the self-serving claim: ‘I love a teeming wit, as I love my nourishment.’ (V.i.16). He may refer to Face as ‘My brain’ but what is perhaps most shrewd is the way he manages to turn his late arrival to personal advantage, even planning to marry the rich widow Pliant himself. His return is entirely possessional in its gestures, ‘The house is mine here,’ (V.v.26), and befits the actions of an absolutist manipulating his subjects in order to further consolidate his rule. It is Lovewit after all who gives the orders to Jeremy (Face) in the final scene - ‘Fill a pipe-full, Jeremy.’ (V.v.141) - by naming him thus he stresses the limited social application of the guise of Face,

however powerful we as an audience may have perceived that persona to be. Similarly it is Lovewit who gives Jeremy leave to speak the epilogue - as indeed James would be expected to give Jonson leave to perform his part in society, that of writer and social critic. Lovewit enacts then the effective role of dramatic censor or Master of the Revels;<sup>36</sup> he declares, 'I will be ruled by thee in anything, Jeremy' (V.v.143) but this is a carefully calculated show of indulgence, akin to the Jacobean displays of clemency that Greenblatt recounts in *Shakespearean*

*Negotiations*.<sup>37</sup> Lovewit claims:

That master  
That had received such happiness by a servant,  
In such a widow, and with so much wealth,  
Were very ungrateful if he would not be  
A little indulgent to that servant's wit,  
And help his fortune, though with some small strain  
Of his own candour. Therefore, gentlemen,  
And kind spectators, if I have outstripped  
An old man's gravity, or strict canon, think  
What a young wife, and a good brain may do;  
Stretch age's truth sometimes, and crack it too.  
Speak for thyself, knave.  
(V.v.146-57)

Face does speak and tries to accord his newly subordinate, or more precisely resubordinated, position in the drama to the

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<sup>36</sup> Interestingly enough Jonson himself would be granted the reversion of this office by James in 1624, see Richard Dutton, 'Ben Jonson and the Master of the Revels', in *Theatre and Government under the Early Stuarts*, ed. by J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 57-86. Jonson plays on this idea in *The Magnetic Lady* where Compass is granted the reversion to the office of Surveyor of the Projects General; he actually inherits the title during the play when the current holder Thin-wit dies. This was another barely-concealed thrust at Inigo Jones, whose office this truly was.

<sup>37</sup> Greenblatt, 'Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne', in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, pp. 129-63.

rules, less of social hierarchies, than of theatrical convention: 'My part a little fell in this last scene, / Yet 'twas decorum' (V.v.158-59); he ends the play by casting its moral reflections back out onto the theatre audience(s), thus questioning the extent of Lovewit's absolutism if not offering any precise definition.

Critical accounts of Lovewit vary; some choose to see him as the common, non-comic, non-performing type, normative almost in his retention of a single character, but this ignores his own pragmatic assumption of the Spanish disguise. I think he is a far shrewder character, one of absolutist tendencies in his control of events and use of language in the final act, and one who must bring into doubt any straightforward reading of this play as pro-monarchy and anti-republicanism.

Our sympathies as an audience are not with Lovewit at the end. His Act V return seems somehow too belated to be deserving of the rewards he so rapidly appropriates. In a play of participation he has consciously avoided interaction with the group (although he may be seen as the best improviser of all). Our sympathies may not be with the dissolved venture either; their fractious collective scarcely constitutes a piece of pro-republican propaganda. The Blackfriars community has in effect been splintered by its collective efforts, perhaps because those efforts were simply not communal enough, or perhaps because



such fissures are inherent in any given “community”. Face, Subtle, and Dol have relinquished their initiatives, Mammon and the Anabaptists have lost their investments (secular and temporal), Surly his dignity, and Dapper and Drugger have been humiliated beyond the call of duty. It is left only to the audience to cohere in the act of applause - democratic, egalitarian, republican applause.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE REPUBLIC IN THE FAIR

The site and situation of *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) have strong implications of community and the communal. The annual Smithfield fair on 24 August in the ever-expanding *polis* that was early-seventeenth-century London attracted a diverse and populous gathering - diverse in terms of rank, profession, objective, and personality. This social *mélange* is of the kind studied by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in terms of the local significance of fairs, which were more often than not held in the village or town marketplace: 'A marketplace is the epitome of local identity (often indeed it is what defined a place as more significant than surrounding communities) . . . .'<sup>1</sup>

This sense of a display of social status that was attached to the fair will prove important later in terms of Bartholomew Cokes's behaviour at the puppet show, but, nevertheless, it was in the marketplace that it was believed possible to achieve a greater social democracy, a 'commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed.'<sup>2</sup> The divergent society of *The Alchemist* is carefully kept apart; only when Subtle and Face's schemes begin

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

to collapse does an intermingling of types occur. At the fair commingling is the defining factor. The fair was, and was held in, a “common place”; it was a hybrid gathering of locals and outsiders and, for that very reason, socially potentially explosive. Stallybrass and White suggest that it was significant that the village marketplace was often axially-positioned on a crossroads - a point of social intersection, but, equally importantly, an unfixed point in directional terms - a point of departure as well as of arrival. Jean-Christophe Agnew states that, “The ancient marketplace was, as the etymology of “limitation” suggests, a *limen*, a threshold.’<sup>3</sup> The marketplace was positioned on the very boundary of normal social hierarchy and ‘The moment of crossing was . . . the moment of *communitas*.’<sup>4</sup>

If the market or fair provided a sense of local identity, then the pressure of trade, often overtly symbolized by the arrival of traders and goods from a ‘world elsewhere’, consistently unsettled that concept. Thresholds have already featured in my considerations of plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. In

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<sup>3</sup> Agnew, p. 23. The *OED* actually says that limitation has its etymological root in *limes*, a boundary, but is akin to *limen*; it also suggests a connection with *limus*, to traverse. The significance of all three for plays such as *Bartholomew Fair* and *Volpone* is self-evident. My thanks to Rowland Cotterill for discussion of this point and to Christopher Pye for reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

each the concept of the threshold functions differently but is part of Jonson's wider concern with issues of boundaries and frontiers - sociopolitical, theatrical, and imaginative. Thresholds both determine and destabilize questions of authority and identity. Volpone transgresses numerous boundaries in his play and the action, in a sense, occurs in and around his threshold. The callers at Volpone's house have settled into a reassuring (and, for Volpone himself, boring) predictability, but as we have seen Celia constitutes a novel factor, a disturbance. The callers at Lovewit's house in *The Alchemist* both enable the protean existence of Subtle, Face, and Dol and yet also, by their eventual collision and collusion, ultimately undermine it.

The community of *Bartholomew Fair* is far from being a fixed and stable entity and therefore, whilst Bakhtin-influenced studies are obviously of value with regard to the play, the essence of this drama has, I believe, to be seen as something rather more complex than a carnivalesque celebration of London society:<sup>5</sup> issues of communal harmony are subjected to a biting critique within the play. Marriage is a central theme, but as is typical of the Jonsonian canon it does not carry with it the harmonizing potential that it does in, say, Shakespearean comedy; marriage in

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<sup>5</sup> Burt, *Licensed by Authority*, suggests that the application of a Bakhtinian model to *Bartholomew Fair* is a critical fallacy, a misunderstanding of the term "popular tradition".

*Bartholomew Fair* is pared down to its skeletal form of a social contract, which is to say an act of contact necessitating a licence, as partners are matched and mismatched in games of aversion and avoidance throughout the day.

The Fair, like any quasi-carnavalesque event, does, however ephemerally, provide the means and wherewithal for these social arrangements and rearrangements. Like the countenanced rank-switching of the Twelfth Night tradition, the convention of the Fair allows for a temporary and legitimate release - as Win's cravings for pig signify. Thus the excitement, the attraction, of the illicit is given a physical focus - for Win in the shape of roast pork, but for others, more often than not, in the form of each other: Quarlous and Winwife's duel over the body of Grace Wellborn is a prime example of this. That notoriously fine line between what is sanctioned by authority and what transgresses it is trodden and occasionally fallen foul of throughout the proceedings of the Fair. The Fair was in a sense the epitome of the "contained subversion" about which Jonathan Dollimore has written so eloquently in relation to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604) and the play as a whole self-consciously parodies the "disguised duke" genre to which

Shakespeare's tragicomedy conforms.<sup>6</sup> Bartholomew Fair was a symbol of disorder, suggestive of confusion, and yet ultimately licensed and authorized. Accorded a time, place, and date, it was, to some extent at least, regulated. Licence, a licence, licensed, and licentiousness: the etymological proximity is no mere coincidence.

The related puns resonate throughout the play:

LEATHERHEAD	Sir, I present nothing but what is licensed by authority.
BUSY	Thou art all licence, even licentiousness itself, Shimei!
	( <i>Bartholomew Fair</i> , V.v.15-18) <sup>7</sup>

In addition, marriage as a ritual or ceremony effects its own analogies with the theatre, as Benjamin Bennett has written in relation to the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal: 'Like marriage itself, the "Zeremonie" in the theater is a symbolic act within society by which the absurdly arbitrary act that is society is reaffirmed and revitalized.'<sup>8</sup> The fair on St. Bartholomew's day similarly affirms the arbitrary acts of society.

Quarlous's "razed" marriage licence, with Grace Wellborn's name hastily removed to allow for the inclusion of Dame

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, 'Transgression and Surveillance in *Measure for Measure*,' in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 72-87.

<sup>7</sup> The edition of *Bartholomew Fair* used throughout this thesis is that contained within *Selected Plays II*. All play quotations in this chapter are from *Bartholomew Fair* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Bennett, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: The Theatres of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 222.

Purecraft's, certainly reduces marriage in its most tangible form to a fiscal contract, a financial transaction like any other effected at the Fair - indeed, possibly more mercenary.<sup>9</sup> Quarlous makes no effort to conceal the fact that he is marrying for money; that in order to do so he can illegally employ legal means - that is, the marriage licence stolen, like so much else, from Bartholomew Cokes - is simply further evidence of the corrupted state of the hallowed marital institution.

Grace herself adamantly denies any politic intentions with regard to her choice of a suitor. If it was money she desired then marriage to Cokes would seem a less appalling prospect than it does: 'these are not my aims. I must have a husband I must love, or I cannot live with him. I shall ill make one of these politic wives.' (IV.iii.14-16). Understandably it is Grace who has been most reluctant from the beginning to participate in the fair, partaking in none of Cokes's desires to experience all of its sights and sounds. She prefers to close her eyes to the harsh commercial realities it embodies, casting herself instead as the heroine of some arcane romance fiction. In truth at the fair, love, or rather sex, is being debased to the level of just another transaction agreed on amidst the booths; 'pig' and 'punk' are indeed the

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<sup>9</sup> The arbitrary nature of the marriage contract is also a feature of the plot of *The Magnetic Lady* (1632) with Compass's marriage to Pleasance.

guiding authorities of the gathering and, on these terms, Ursula the pig-woman is undoubtedly its human representative, the body 'politic'.<sup>10</sup>

What Grace aspires to ignore is the contractual basis of all we do; she positively prefers to abide in the fictive realm of romance where men duel for her love, laden under extravagant *noms de plume* ; (The names they select - Palamon and Arcite - are a parody of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*). Yet contracts have been foregrounded from the very beginning, even in terms of the drama's pre-performance existence, since theatre itself and individual plays required their own licence from authority to acquire legitimate status.<sup>11</sup> Authorial judgement is suspended in this play-text; the single writer of *Bartholomew Fair* is an absent one - the scrivener who wrote the two marriage contracts: the legal one for John Littlewit and the forged version for Jordan Knockem.

The fair is obviously an analogue, even a synecdoche, for the theatre; Jonson self-consciously brings the place of the stage onto

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<sup>10</sup> I follow both George Hibbard's (New Mermaid) and Martin Butler's (Cambridge University Press) editorial lead here in spelling 'Ursula' thus, in respect of early modern pronunciation.

<sup>11</sup> Burt, *Licensed by Authority*, makes a timely request for the notion of censorship to be redefined from being about repression or freedom of speech to an understanding of legitimized or delegitimized discourses. He suggests that *Bartholomew Fair* is a play that engages directly with such themes.



the stage by setting *Bartholomew Fair* at the Hope Theatre, close to the actual site of the fair. As with *The Alchemist*, numerous critics have commented upon the deliberate blurring of fictive and real localities. Mullaney has suggested that theatre's geographical marginalization in the area of the Liberties realized topographically what he regards as the motivating essence of the 'cultural performances of any given society': they are, he says, 'produced not only by its reigning hierarchies, but also by the contestatory, marginal, and residual forces that the dominant culture must endlessly resort to and upon in order to maintain its dominance.'<sup>12</sup>

The Fair was one of the various ceremonies and festivals conducted throughout the London year that did help to consolidate the city's civic identity by associating it with the physical body of the community. Yet the fair was necessarily marginal, placed at Smithfield on the outskirts of the city to reduce its pollutive effects - the meat market was regularly held there and contained the resultant offal and ordure on the city boundaries. It was also marginal in that it performed a kind of

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<sup>12</sup> Mullaney, p. xii. Marcus points out that Bartholomew Fair had not actually been part of the Liberties until 1608, see *Politics of Mirth*. This placed it for the first time under the civic ordinance of the City corporation. The Corporation was notorious for its attempts to curb the operations of the various theatres under its jurisdiction; it was regarded as hypocritical therefore in its tolerance of the fair post-1608. In 1614 it actually paved walkways on the site. Jonson exposes this hypocrisy in his running analogy between the fair and theatre in the play.

commentary upon normal civic procedures (akin to Mistress Otter's dream of the Lord Mayor's Pageant in *Epicoene*).

The polyvocality<sup>13</sup> of *Bartholomew Fair* has led many critics to describe it as a population writ small, more specifically as a microcosm of early modern London. The notion of the burgeoning seventeenth-century capital city being re-created amidst the recreative booths of the fair feeds Brian Gibbons's interpretation in *Jacobean City Comedy*.<sup>14</sup> But the community of *Bartholomew Fair* is surely also just that, the community of Bartholomew Fair, which provides on its own grounds and on its own terms, one of Stanley Fish's 'interpretive communities'. That is not to discount Jonson's ability to take into dramatic and intellectual account the social transitions that were occurring in contemporary London - the new influx of rural poor, sudden suburban expansion, resultant overcrowding, the emergent *nouveaux riches*, increasingly fervent movements of Puritanism and capitalism (not always unconnected) - but it is to stress the inalienable right of the play-community to be self-representative.

It is Justice Overdo who persistently refers to the population of the Fair as a 'commonwealth' or 'republic', within which he

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<sup>13</sup> The term is Peter Womack's, see *Ben Jonson*.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1980). The *Bartholomew Fair* chapter is one of the important additions to the revised version.

regards himself as the ultimate licence-giver and authority (his speeches resound with the term 'warrant'). Of course, such a singular (and absolutist?) assertion of the doctrine of power places a question-mark alongside Overdo's understandings of 'republicanism'. His would be an *ottimati*-led republic, along the lines counselled by Guicciardini rather than Machiavelli in sixteenth century Italy, not of the radical populace-based variety Annabel Patterson has striven, occasionally somewhat manipulatively, to find support for in Jacobean drama.<sup>15</sup> Overdo is, as Robert Watson has divulged at length, another of Jonson's notorious misreaders.

Questions of authority are directly explored through the figure of the disguised Justice: 'I am the man, friend Trouble-all, though thus disguised (as the careful magistrate ought) for the good of the republic in the Fair, and the weeding out of enormity.' (V.ii.106-09). However, as plain Adam Overdo, his nomenclature shorn of office, he is Fallen Man - as fallible and gullible, if not more so, than any of his wards, familial or political - for Bartholomew Fair is scarcely a prelapsarian setting.

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<sup>15</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

The topical allusion of Overdo's speeches to James VI and I has been well-documented.<sup>16</sup> Overdo cannot help but suggest the King's tendency towards hyperbolic self-comparisons with Jove. This was a central conceit of Jacobean iconography and the masque genre: 'Neither is the hour of my severity yet come, to reveal myself, wherein, cloud-like, I will break out in rain and hail, lightning and thunder, upon the head of enormity.' (V.ii.4-7). Overdo is attempting here to create the kind of anxiety effect by which Jacobean law was frequently consolidated,<sup>17</sup> but once again he fails, succeeding only in eliciting our laughter.

Any social gathering or event is, by necessity, a political phenomenon, an undertaking, be it in the form of a fair or a theatrical production. Bennett regards 'the purpose of the theatre as an institution . . . to be precisely the opening of an area of contact between individual and communal experience where each is enabled to intrude upon the other at a high level of consciousness . . . .'<sup>18</sup> Issues of authority are constantly at stake and in the stocks, quite literally, in *Bartholomew Fair*, even though

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<sup>16</sup> In Adam Overdo, Jonson is parodying the disguised duke motif, which Shakespeare and Marston amongst others had popularized to the extent of creating a genre. The famous Shakespearean example is that of the disguised Duke Vincentio in the garb of a friar in *Measure for Measure*. Like Vincentio, Overdo is often seen as a reference to King James.

<sup>17</sup> See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Bennett, *Hofmannsthal*, p. 91.

the carnivalesque court of Pie Powders is never ultimately held; this is why the cultural artefact that is the contract is such a crucial entity in the play.

Constitutions are also written contracts and this wider sphere of reference for this remarkable play should never be underestimated: the Articles of Agreement drawn up between audience and playwright in the Play's Induction may be a synecdoche for the social contract between a monarch and his/her subjects, suggesting the need to accord those "paying" subjects certain rights:

It is further agreed that every person here have his or their free-will of censure, to like or dislike, at their own charge; the author having now departed with his right, it shall be lawful for any man to judge his six penn'orth, his twelve penn'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place - provided always his place get not above his wit.

(Induction, ll.99-106)<sup>19</sup>

Jean-Christophe Agnew remarks that:

The theater not only mirrored new social relations within the visible framework of the old; it improvised - as a matter of its own constitutive conventions - a new social contract between itself and its audience - a new set of conditions for the suspension of disbelief that became over time the preconditions of most modern drama.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In the 1987 production at the Regents Park Open Air Theatre, London, Peter Barnes, the adaptor and director, not only chose to add dialogue and balladry of his own but he omitted the entire Induction scene. This seems to me to entirely miss the point. The critical framework to the play is vital here as it is in *The Magnetic Lady*. Recent productions of *Bartholomew Fair* all appear to have done injustice to the text. Richard Eyre's 1989 production at the National Theatre, London transposed events to nineteenth-century London, in the process cutting the dense topicality of the Jonsonian text and eschewing its central politics.

<sup>20</sup> Agnew, p. 11.

Jonson was not the author of political tracts; he neither viewed himself as a political spokesperson, a precursor of Hobbes, nor as a theatrical pseudo-monarch. However he did see parallels to be drawn between questions of authorial right and the potential tyranny of either dramatist or acting company over a text and the debate over the prerogative, limited or otherwise, of the monarch him/herself: questions of democratic rights were prevalent in both domains. Again we can see familiar arguments from modern critical theory being played out on the stages of the early modern period.

Joseph Loewenstein has written about the fate of the script in the marketplace.<sup>21</sup> He states that Jonson acknowledged the extent to which any dramatist relinquished the rights to a piece of work once it was sold to an acting company: this was standard practice during Jonson's lifetime as Philip Henslowe's "Diaries", more precisely theatre record-books, inform us.<sup>22</sup> If the motivating factor was purchase then it seems no mere coincidence that Jonson's canon resonates with the themes of purchase and consumption, its positive and negative values:

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<sup>21</sup> Joseph Loewenstein, 'The Script in the Marketplace', in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 265-78; see also Stephen Orgel, 'What is a Text?', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 24 (1981), 3-6.

<sup>22</sup> See Rutter.

Certainly, the very idea of market is under examination in *Bartholomew Fair*, but the Induction is perhaps the most radical movement in the play's market analysis. The Induction purports to *change* the literary market contractually; further it represents Jonson, and not the Lady Elizabeth's servants, as the true publisher of the play.<sup>23</sup>

Loewenstein is right in deeming Jonson 'a man ambiguously engaged with the literary marketplace';<sup>24</sup> as indeed, he was ambiguously engaged with the wider, political implications that lay only fractionally beyond it.

Language was another transaction. Stallybrass and White mention Sturbridge Fair held in Cambridge at which books from all over Europe exchanged hands. Students thus traded knowledge and discussion for pecuniary payment. The multiple dialects of *Bartholomew Fair* are an alternative example of the linguistic transaction - the "game of vapours" representing an extreme under which the exchange is no longer productive. Gillian Beer mentions the fiscal meaning of 'utterance' in the Middle Ages:<sup>25</sup> utterance is the bringing of wares for sale; the production of meaning therefore requires both a buyer and a seller (the linguistic game is one of 'vapours' since no dialogic transaction actually takes place). Conversations may produce

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<sup>23</sup> Loewenstein, 'The Script in the Marketplace', p. 267.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Gillian Beer, 'Circulatory Systems: Money, Gossip, and Blood in *Middlemarch*', in her *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 99-116.

dominant exploitative salespersons, like Lantern Leatherhead duping Bartholomew Cokes, and theatre itself is sold to audiences, requiring their presence in varying numbers for the production of meaning.

The game of vapours is also indicative of the multifarious tensions the fair only just holds in balance: the game at its extremity threatens to explode into violence and self-destruction. In the *Discourses* (1530) Machiavelli suggested that the holding in tension of two warring factions was the nature of a successful republic, since otherwise a republic was likely to produce tyranny and dictatorship in its struggle for democracy.<sup>26</sup> Jonson recognizes these political truisms in his comedies as well as in his more clearly Machiavellian-influenced Roman tragedies.

The acting company was itself a sociopolitical “republic”, liable as it was to its own protracted power struggles. What the ‘Articles of Agreement’ drawn up in *Bartholomew Fair* indicate is a dominating awareness that any performance is dependent upon the nature, composition, and reception of any one audience, on any one day. The specificity of the fair’s occurrence or

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<sup>26</sup> In *Discourses I*, he describes how the tension between the patricians and the plebeians led to the formation of the offices of the tribunes; this he said made the republic ‘more perfect’, see I.4., ‘That Discord between the Plebs and the Senate of Rome made this Republic both Free and Powerful’, in *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. by Leslie J. Walker, with an additional introduction by Cecil H. Clough (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), I, p. 219.



“happening” is also extended to the theatrical “happening”. A certain group of individuals is held together under the collective title of audience for a limited period, ostensibly by the dramatic text and the particular ramifications of its performance:

the theater of the Renaissance more closely resembled an occasional discretionary compact struck between performers and audience. The transaction consisted of two ‘partners’ who agreed in effect, to authorize one another for the determinate duration of the play and, at the same time, to immunize one another from any extratheatrical consequences that would follow from a literal or, for that matter, a ritualist reading of their collaborative fiction.<sup>27</sup>

Jonson’s play, the fair itself, and Leatherhead’s puppet play are all licensed performances and yet, Burt suggests, Jonson sees only certain of these entertainments as “legitimate”.

‘One place, many places in and around one place, one place; concentration, expansion, concentration; the pattern is already clear and significant. *Bartholmew Fair* [sic] may well appear a mighty maze at first sight, but it is not without a plan ’; this is how G.R. Hibbard describes the play.<sup>28</sup> His terminology can be appropriated with reference to the play as a whole and not simply its complex narrative structure. The senses of fluidity, of vacillation, mutability, and ephemerality alongside intensity, are all features of a reader’s or a spectator’s experience of

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<sup>27</sup> Agnew, pp. 110-11.

<sup>28</sup> In the introductory essay to his New Mermaid edition of *Bartholmew Fair* [This spelling is consistent with the edition], ed. by G.R. Hibbard (London: Ernest Benn, 1977), p. xviii.

*Bartholomew Fair*. It is an ahistorical coincidence that identical notions of concentration and expansion, of simultaneous unity and dispersal, haunts the prose and poetry of so-called Modernist texts and texts on the subject of modernity. Marshall Berman sees the urban *polis*, the modern city (with Paris, New York, and St. Petersburg all offered as archetypes for the twentieth century) as a social maelstrom (to translate Baudelaire's *le tourbillon social*) in which there are endless concoctions of comings-together, separations, divisions and amalgamations, constructions and destructions (and deconstructions).<sup>29</sup> Bennett suggests that theatre and the theatrical experience embody 'The idea of the social as existing in constant tension between the dangers of fragmentation and petrification . . . .'<sup>30</sup> Related themes dominate one of the prime modernist texts to engage with the concept of the audience as we have been discussing it here: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941).

The quasi-Aristotelian unities observed by *Between the Acts* - the single performance of the traditional yearly village "pageant" at Pointz Hall on a single afternoon - enable Woolf to explore the altering composition, context, and circumstance of its audience. As

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<sup>29</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Verso, 1982).

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Bennett, *Hofmannsthal*, p. 197.

Richard Schechner and others were later to encapsulate in formulated theory, Woolf recognized the collective production of meaning that any play stimulated, and how that was fiercely dependent upon context and circumstance: upon location, upon history (personal and political), even upon the weather and the unpredictable invasions of Nature (the lowing of a herd of cows that at one point grinds the production to a halt). The complex interpersonal relations of the novel's fictional audience do affect the design and intentions of Miss La Trobe's pageant direction and, without a trace of doubt, behind the figure of the director stands Woolf herself, nervously relinquishing her artistic product up for public consumption. The fragility of the moment is only too recognizable in Woolf's compositions and in the 'scraps and fragments' of the collective experience that the novel requests readers to participate in.

Something remarkably akin to Woolf's achievement is in operation in *Bartholomew Fair*. The contract establishes at the outset that 'even meaning becomes a commodity, something to be haggled over in the transaction between stage and gallery.'<sup>31</sup> Yet there is something more intrinsic to Jonson's artistic, as opposed to mercantilist, persona under debate here: the paradoxically

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<sup>31</sup> John Gordon Sweeney, *Jonson and the Psychology of Public Theater* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 7.

liberating and yet self-negating recognition by the author that any reader or spectator produces an autonomous response to his/her work. Over three centuries apart Jonson and Woolf are crediting the 'productive and emancipated spectator' that theorists such as Susan Bennett describe as a product of the contemporary theatrical experience.<sup>32</sup>

The theoretical writings of Schechner come nearer the point when he traces the origins of theatre to the Greek festivals of Dionysius. Greek theatre was inseparable from the social, economic, and political structures of Athens: even the architectural dimensions of the amphitheatres emphasized this since their open-air designs enabled the city to be visible throughout any performance. The relationship of all theatre to the Dionysian tendency is also good-humouredly encoded in *Bartholomew Fair*. Busy's debate with the puppet Dionysius over theatre and the confused gendering of the boy actor culminates in the puppet's skirt-lifting revelation that it has no gender at all. Dionysius, the god who presided over the Greek theatrical festivals, was a famously androgynous figure and much play on this was made in the work of Euripides and Aristophanes. The latter playwright's awareness and exploitation of his Athenian

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<sup>32</sup> See Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990).

setting and audiences had great influence on the work of Ben Jonson.<sup>33</sup>

*Bartholomew Fair* is acutely aware of its London setting; in anthropological terms it is a cultural product of this environment. Contemporary audiences are likely to have recognized, if not frequented, the places Jonson so meticulously details. In a sense he is turning, metaphorically at least, mirrors on his audience(s), just as Miss La Trobe does in the closing minutes of her avant-garde production in *Between the Acts*.

If all good theatre is to some extent voyeurism then do we in the decision to attend theatre seek the 'comfort of strangers'? The fellowship of the Fair may have this instigation and certainly Nightingale and Edgeworth seek the comfort of strangers for alternative reasons - Nightingale selects the busiest thoroughfares in which to sing, enabling Edgeworth to ply his trade amid the confusions and convenient distractions of the crowd. The audience makes a political undertaking in cohering (or not) in the activity of theatre-going as opposed to fairing - even if only in the gesture of social tolerance that it constitutes. The local economy will have a decisive effect upon the audience's composition - for

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<sup>33</sup> Editorial glosses in *Selected Plays II* also suggest that the schoolmaster persona of the Puppet Dionysius links him to Dionysius the younger, tyrant of Syracuse, who was supposed to have become a schoolmaster after his abdication, see Leatherhead's lines at V.iv.327-30.

Woolf, the fictional pageant's new spectators are a product of the construction of a nearby car-factory and aerodrome, a mark of progress and modernization but also of the impending second world war; for Jonson, there was the metamorphosing London population with its increasing capitalism and acquisitiveness in the early years of James VI and I's reign.

The mix or blend in an audience is important since the responses of others invariably prove infectious: our responses, in society and in the theatre, are constantly guided by others. In this respect audiences were regarded as an analogue to the 'fickle multitude' of popular political consciousness and chided in pamphlets and plays alike for their aptitude to ebb and flow in opinion. The alternative commentaries of others frequently redetermine our own and the responses to Leatherhead's puppet play confirm this general rule. Perhaps a rethinking of the tendency to stage *Bartholomew Fair* as a big spectacular would be useful here: placing the text in more intimate surroundings may re-alert audiences to their own context(s) of reception.

If the fair strips linguistics down to a mere transaction, then Jonson was also aware of language's contagious qualities. Poetry is described in these diagnostic terms by Overdo when he is an onlooker to the friendship and professional alliance between Edgeworth the thief and Nightingale the ballad-maker:

I have followed him all the Fair over, and still I find him with this songster; and I begin shrewdly to suspect their familiarity, and the young man of a terrible taint, poetry! With which idle disease, if he be infected, there's no hope of him in a state-course. *Actum est* of him for a commonwealths-man if he go to't in rhyme once.

(III.v.4-10)

This is Touchstone's theory of poetry, the most 'feigning'; language as artifice is always foregrounded in audience consciousness of the fair. Jonson acknowledged that this reflected back onto his own trade; he was aware of how perilously close he trod to fraudulence and deception. Overdo sees the art of poetry as disqualifying writers from political office - specifically those offices representative of the people, the commonwealth or common weal. Jonson is surely encouraging audiences to deduce the opposite and conclude that poetry and ballads are political undertakings, relevant to the state. Nightingale's lyrics are calculating and have the firm objective, albeit illegal, of robbing Cokes; his craft is scarcely art for art's sake.

This heightened state of self-perception provides an explanation for the centrality of the scene in III.v. where Nightingale and Edgeworth collude via ballad-making to rob the naive spectator (Bartholomew Cokes). Cokes is easily drawn to the songs that Nightingale is "selling" (again we have words as the mainstay of a financial transaction: Shakespeare employed a similar situation - and similarly crooked - with Autolycus's songs

in *The Winter's Tale* (1610-11)<sup>34</sup>. But Nightingale's songs are no mere witty distraction: their lyrics warn against the prevalence of thieves and cutpurses in the world: '*It hath been upbraided to men of my trade, / That oftentimes we are the cause of this crime.*' (III.v.96-97), and yet again Cokes fails to register the tell-tale signs that language offers him.

Purchasing goods, wares, and (fickle) friendships on sight as he goes, Cokes is a gloriously amusing example of conspicuous consumption. At the close of day, he finds himself bereft of all, even his initial companion and prospective wife. Although presciently aware that his forename establishes or even endorses some vocative affinity between himself and the Fair, he fails to complete his reading of this signifier: for his surname is London slang for a fool and this is indeed what the fair and its community make of him. Cokes cannot discourse fully in the city's language(s) and this leaves him open to abuse, persuasion, and deception. Quarlous, as astutely as ever, notes that Cokes is 'a

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<sup>34</sup> Burt, *Licensed by Authority*, effects a fascinating comparison between Shakespeare and Jonson's attitudes towards theatre in *The Winter's Tale* and *Bartholomew Fair* respectively. He dwells at length on the Autolycus scene and the difference between the new songs he is selling and Shakespeare's 'old tale' in order to suggest Shakespeare seeks a transcendence for his art and yet does not draw the parallel with the Nightingale scene in *Bartholomew Fair*, instead citing the puppet play as the entertainment Jonson sought to delegitimize. The comparison of the two song-selling scenes would open wider questions of Jonson-Shakespeare interaction rather than difference - a point Burt is anxious to make.



rogue in apprehension' (I.v.153); his misunderstandings do individualize him to his own misfortune in this respect.

Signs and signals, signifiers and signified - in these terms are contained the aspects and ambience of the fair. Humphrey Wasp, the resentful and (at least in his own eyes) wily servant and companion to Cokes (casting himself as the all-knowing servant of Plautine tradition) describes his adolescent master as absolutely entranced by the whole experience of London (travelling from the secluded suburbs as he does). Cokes is entranced to such a degree that he reads aloud every signpost:

We ha' been but a day and a half in town, gentlemen, 'tis true; and yesterday i'the afternoon we walked London, to show the city to the gentlewoman he shall marry, Mistress Grace; but, afore I will endure such another half day with him, I'll be drawn with a good gibcat through the great pond at home, as his uncle Hodge was! Why, we could not meet that heathen thing all day but stayed him: he would name you all the signs over, as he went, aloud:

(I.iv.121-30)

However, as we have indicated in the account of the ballad scene, Cokes is a poor semiotician, a misreader of signs.

Not that *Bartholomew Fair* allows the audience to adopt any over-superior stance towards Cokes for very long. The play's own signs are deliberately oblique and readers and spectators are liable to, even encouraged to, lose their way amidst its labyrinthine configurations of characters and plot developments. Even the reassuringly distinguishable Jonsonian "traits" are shifting sands here. Barton has written tellingly about Jonsonian

nomenclature and it is true that defining and identifying names often humiliate or humble their characters into understanding and indeed being understood, but nomenclature is never utterly reliable. Despite a wife-character called Win and a prospective suitor called Winwife, the wife being hunted is initially Dame Purecraft and subsequently Grace. The Fair is prone to blind us with its colour and variety and therefore we can never morally differentiate ourselves from Cokes. Our judgmental capacity and authority is undermined as much as Justice Overdo's.

Little wonder that Cokes misreads and poorly translates the signs and signals of the fair when his brother-in-law, Overdo, partakes of constant misapprehensions. Overdo's occasional soliloquies may hit on the truth but it is always in inadvertent fashion; for example, when he says by way of explanation of his disguise as "Mad Arthur of Bradley":

Would all men in authority would follow this worthy precedent! For, alas, we are public persons, what do we know? Nay, what can we know? We hear with other men's ears; we see with other men's eyes; a foolish constable, or a sleepy watchman, is all our information.

(II.i.31-36)

Is misunderstanding of this nature the process that generates the individual, notably so in the fair or theatre? Benjamin Bennett poses the question 'of whether it is our individuality that involves us in misunderstanding, or a prior

process of misunderstanding that creates our individuality.’<sup>35</sup>

Chance and misunderstanding are seemingly crucial for the practical and linguistic operation of the fair. Cokes is not the only one susceptible to the ballads; Overdo is once again an unquestioning observer, enjoying the ‘paltry piece of poetry’ and investigating little further than his own pleasurable responses. However, as Nightingale’s lyrics warn him, his authority is no protection from the harsh realities: cutpurses have no qualms and will rob near scaffolds or at court (both sites of the execution of the monarch’s power):

*At plays and at sermons, and at the sessions,  
‘Tis daily their practice such booty to make:  
Yea, under the gallows, at executions,  
They stick not the stare-about’s purses to take  
Nay, one without grace,  
At a far better place,  
At court, and in Christmas, before the king’s face.*  
(III.v.142-48)

This has intriguing connotations for Jonson’s perception of his own role as masque-maker (frequently Christmas masque-maker) to the court of James VI and I.<sup>36</sup> Significantly enough, Cokes wishes to employ Nightingale as the ‘poet’ to his wedding ‘masque’. This can be seen as rendering Cokes a parody of the monarch as patron, commissioning texts, the full import of which he barely

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Bennett, *Hofmannsthal*, p. 201.

<sup>36</sup> And for the performance of this play before King James at Whitehall the evening following its public theatre debut at the Hope on 31 October 1614. This is the only other contemporary performance recorded and may imply its poor reception at court.

realizes. This in turn politicizes the masques that Jonson had been composing in the years leading up to *Bartholomew Fair*; he might also have been committing criminal acts ‘before the king’s face’, countenanced or otherwise.

Ballads were literary remakings - often the retelling of folk tales, lyric and tune being handed down through generations; but they also allowed for reinterpretations within each new context. As convention rearranged, the ballad had definite parallels with the fair and the theatre. Dramatic potential includes the joint possibility for renewal and change. The fair is an annual event, repeated and yet subject to endless vicissitudes during a single day. Expectations exist but they are invariably confounded; the fair, like the Jonsonian text is a complex, multifarious thing to “read” and liable to produce a multiplicity of meanings and intentions.

Jonson flirted with verse, prose, and a combination of the two in his plays. *Bartholomew Fair* is a vibrant example of a prose-drama, possibly because this was the most evocative means of suggesting “everyday speech”, the quotidian language of the marketplace. It may also be considered an egalitarian theatrical gesture.<sup>37</sup> The prose of *Bartholomew Fair* is notable for its large

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<sup>37</sup> Stanley Fish in a typically provocative essay has implied that Jonson’s poetic canon consists of the alternating inclusion and exclusion of a group of readers who were an elite selection from the start; see, ‘Authors-Readers:

propensity of dialogue scenes. The lengthy soliloquies of Justice Overdo are an exception and the ignorant commentary they provide underlines his need to discourse with others if only to reassess his interpretations. Quarlous's long speech at I.iii. is rare and therefore intriguing. His rebuke of Winwife for wooing elderly widows in an effort to secure a personal fortune strikes a brutal and rather angry note amid the humorous events and repercussions of the fair. There is a strange intrusion, albeit momentarily, of the darker side of things:

thou must visit 'em, as thou wouldst do a tomb, with a torch, or three handfulls of link, flaming hot, and so thou mayst hap to make 'em feel thee, and after, come to inherit according to thy inches.

(I.iii.84-88)

The hypocrisy of this is evident in retrospect when we consider the nature and motive for Quarlous's coupling with Widow Purecraft, but disease is again on the agenda. Linguistically this is a complex stage in the play's proceedings; the tone and the vocabulary seem markedly different; the critical cliché of *Bartholomew Fair's* "geniality" is clearly not the whole story.

Throughout his career Jonson examined the question of the "alien", the "outsider"; it is a driving force in the antimasque form he developed (think for example of the gypsies in *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621), or the citizens in *Pan's Anniversary*

(c.1620)<sup>38</sup>); it explains the decision by Volpone to assume the disguise of Dr. Scoto the Mantuan mountebank. The notion of the outsider also in part explicates the specificity of the characterizations in *Bartholomew Fair*. Cokes is from 'Harrow o' the Hill', a visitor to the big city; Busy is a Banbury man - with all the oppositional notions of good baking that location represents for a supposed strict Puritan.

The fair operates on, and is operated upon by, its internal and external visitants in different fashion. Ursula is the 'body of the fair'; the enormities of the fair pivot around events at her booth, where the synecdochal pig is roasted, and which would have been positioned onstage to resemble the old hell-mouth of the mystery plays. Women characters seek the refuge of her booth to urinate in her chamber pot and she constitutes a warped earth-mother figure, her maternal instincts perversely reenacted in her relationship with the fair freak, Mooncalf. Although her body is the subject of various exclamations on leakage and escape

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<sup>38</sup> In his article 'Ben Jonson's *Pan's Anniversary* and the Politics of Early Stuart Pastoral', *ELR*, 22 (1992), 369-404, Martin Butler observes that Jonson's Boeotian antimasquers - tradespeople, craftsmen, and mechanics - have ostensibly come from Thebes to invade the peace of Arcadia but 'sound rather as though they had stumbled in from Jacobean London' (p. 382). Butler suggests this urban invasion (contained by Arcadia/the Court) is somehow a typically Jonsonian variant on the pastoral theme but seems to discount *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the process of arguing that Jonson is writing a pastoral masque specifically to legislate for the Crown. [N.B.: the spelling of "gipsies" in Jonson's *The Gipsies/Gypsies Metamorphosed* does vary from edition to edition. For reasons of continuity I have adopted the "i" rather than the "y" spelling throughout the thesis.]

- sweat, disease, urine, physical and sexual excess, all are invoked in the process<sup>39</sup> - she is less infected than infectious: 'Out upon her, how she drips! She's able to give a man the sweating sickness, with looking on her ' (II.v.129-31). She remains essentially unchanged by the day's events; her role is one of the catalyst as opposed to actuant or victim.

Cokes is possibly ultimately a victim of himself; as a result of his traumatic experiences at the Fair it is doubtful that he rediscovers himself in any altered condition:

I ha' lost myself, and my cloak and my hat; and my fine sword,  
and my sister, and Numps, and Mistress Grace, a gentlewoman  
that I should ha'married, and a cut-work handkercher she  
ga'me, and two purses today. And my bargain o'hobby-horses  
and gingerbread, which grieves me worst of all.

(IV.ii.97-103)

That the latter items grieve Cokes worst of all is an indication that his priorities are still all wrong. He is still misreading the signs, still blissfully unaware of the deceit practiced upon him by Leatherhead and Joan Trash. The surface of life is still what impresses him most. This is evidenced when he borrows the admission fee to see the puppet play having lost all his money to Edgeworth's swift hands. Despite the loan Cokes insists on paying well over the odds in an ostentatious and ridiculous display of social status: 'Twopence? There's twelvence, friend. Nay, I am a

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<sup>39</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, makes the interesting point that urination appears in the text to be a peculiarly female problem. She examines the literary connection between urination, release, and prostitution through such figures as Ursula and Dol Common.

gallant, as simple as I look now, if you see me with my man about me, and my artillery again!' (V.iii.47-50). In a similar vein, Cokes fails to realize that Leatherhead is not only the salesperson who duped him earlier in the day/play, but that he is also deliberately simplifying the play's subject matter for him and the others whose interpretive record has proved so poor. Such a conscious undermining of his social status seems to entirely escape Cokes's notice.

Leatherhead is tampering with his classical-mythological subject matter, the story of Hero and Leander, fitting the discourse to the demands of his audience. In an obvious parody of the 1590s penchant for Ovid-influenced epyllia,<sup>40</sup> Jonson now locates the story by the Thames and not the Hellespont, writing his reductionist version in the classical metre of alexandrines and heroic couplets. Cupid is busy getting Hero drunk so that she will fall into bed with Leander. Interpretations of Jonson's motives here are various; many take this as confirmation of his objection to the theory that theatre needs to aim at the lowest common denominator, that to please the audience is the be-all and end-all.<sup>41</sup> He was renowned for his usage of classical and mythological

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<sup>40</sup> A parody Bate argues is present in *Poetaster*, see *Shakespeare and Ovid*.

<sup>41</sup> A 1992 Bristol Young Vic Theatre School production which altered the puppet play to contemporary bawdy suggests the cast were in sympathy with this idea.



sources and had occasionally faced the stumbling block of uncomprehending or miscomprehending audiences. Yet his text as a whole stands in overt contrast to the puppet play, perhaps flattering to a real audience in the suggestion that their powers of interpretation far exceed those of the characters onstage. *Leatherhead* is partially a satire on Inigo Jones's preference for the spectacular in the masques he co-designed with Jonson, to satisfy their courtly audiences. The dramatist may have disapproved of such outright showmanship but he was enough of a dramatic realist to know that as Edgeworth states (in the hope of escaping punishment for his own uncomprehended fair activities) 'The act is nothing, without a witness.' (IV.iii.129-30). There has been a witness to his, and everyone else's, behaviour throughout the day but the disguised Justice's competence has been brought under scrutiny by those same events. Again the layers of reference are multiple.

The puppet play again endorses the fact that language is a financial, commercial commodity. It is a discursive enterprise for which we pay, as the detailing of the payment of admission fees suggests: 'Clearly the price of admission is an important ritual in the cultural event of theatre.'<sup>42</sup> The ticket price, the seating location, all these aspects of theatre-going denote the operation of

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, p. 77.

class-systems in our modern era, of rank and hierarchy in Jonson's. In the Induction he made gleeful reference to the overtly trusting nature of investors in the theatrical transaction, in that they pay out in full before even viewing the goods - this is again analogous to Cokes's desire to 'see all' at the fair. The Induction also states that it is 'lawful for any man to judge his six penn'orth, his twelve penn'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place ' (Induction, ll.102-05) - the right of judgement is relative to the price of admission. Thus status buys access to the discourse of judgement and authority; such are the inequalities of the legal system, amongst others. There is a recognition by Jonson here of the undemocratic basis of the supposedly democratic experience of public theatre as well as the Law.<sup>43</sup>

*Bartholomew Fair* is a play that engages with the concept of republicanism in more than just its communal ambience. The structure of the play and its exploration/exploitation of the

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<sup>43</sup> In *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), Stephen Orgel argues for the notion of a "democratic" theatre in the Renaissance. The description seems at odds with observations made elsewhere in the same text that, for example: 'The Elizabethan public theater established a hierarchy that was primarily economic . . . .' (p. 8). He achieves doublethink of Orwellian proportions when he goes on to declare that 'Within these categories, all spectators were equal [but some were more equal than others?]; nothing in the structure of the play-house or the quality of the theatrical experience distinguished the lord who paid his threepence from the merchant who paid his.' (p. 8). Cokes's wrangle over admission fees in *Bartholomew Fair* surely proves the opposite, that theatre fostered bourgeois aspirations of upward mobility and was far from being a "democratizing institution".

theatrical experience are all factors in its engagement with questions of absolutism and democracy. Jonson was self-critical enough to see how this extended to incorporate the dramatic creation and its creator in questions of authority and the discourse of power. As the experience of *Bartholomew Fair*, both as reading matter and in performance, indicates Jonson is too readily seen as orthodox, as a supporter of the dominant ideology. While not arguing any simple oppositional and extremist case for “Jonson the republican”, his careerist contributions to the court penchant for masques suggest a far more complex relationship than that. Any writer’s need for patronage made him/her relatively answerable to those in authority or of higher social standing. Yet the court masque-maker and the poet were the same Ben Jonson who endured lengthy stints in prison not only over violence but over his work and for theatrical outspokenness; questions of legality and equality perturbed him for obvious reasons. That Jonson felt able to pose these questions through his drama was a mark of his innovation and courage in experimentation (and possibly his middle, mediatory position as we saw in Chapter Three).

That the theories of modern critical practice can enable us to find new routes of access in to the dramas is a mark not of some developmental reading, establishing Jonson as somehow before his time, but rather that he recognized, if via an alternative

vocabulary, the political undertaking that theatre constituted.

*Bartholomew Fair* proves conversely its potency for local readings, that it was very much a play of its time and of ours: cheaper seats, the right of all to attend theatre - modern concerns resonate amid the booths of the fair making it ripe for current production.

**Feigning Commonwealths?: Ben Jonson and Republicanism**

**Two volumes**

**Volume II**

**Julie Sanders**

**Submitted for the degree of PhD in Renaissance Studies  
at the University of Warwick**

**Centre for the Study of the Renaissance**

**September 1994**

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CHAPTER EIGHT: "THE COLLECTIVE CONTRACT IS A FRAGILE  
STRUCTURE": LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PERSONAL RULE  
IN *A TALE OF A TUB*

I: Questioning nostalgia

The prologue to *A Tale of a Tub* (c.1633) is at some pains to stress that the playtext does not engage with state affairs:

No state affairs, nor any politic club,  
Pretend we in our Tale, here, of a Tub,  
But acts of clowns and constables today  
Stuff out the scenes of our ridiculous play.  
(*A Tale of a Tub*, Prologue, ll.1-4)<sup>1</sup>

But the question must surely be posed whether by emphasizing the very absence of allusions of a contemporary, politicized nature, the text does not draw attention to their very presence, subversively suggesting the potential for just such topicality on and about 'state affairs'.<sup>2</sup> Martin Butler argues, in a related vein, that the drama's happy and harmonious ending transcends the social tensions otherwise registered in any given performance, thus consolidating rather than subverting Caroline rule in the

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<sup>1</sup> All play quotations in this chapter are from *A Tale of a Tub* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, makes a similar point.



1630s.<sup>3</sup> For me the play's close merely constitutes a theatrical veneer, a "happy ending" that barely conceals the problems, political and social, revealed elsewhere in the text.

Similarly double-edged is the Prologue's confident declaration: 'We bring you now, to show what different things / The cotes of clowns are from the courts of kings.' (Prologue, ll.11-12). This assertion has the dual potential to suggest either its exact antithesis - that the cotes and the courts are in as much proximity as their all too possible aural slippage might imply - or, conversely, that there is indeed a vast difference between these two entities, thus indicating how far removed from the reality of provincial life the monarch's experiment with so-called 'personal rule' (i.e. non-parliamentary) in the 1630s truly was, and implying that the policies of centralization failed to comprehend the outlying localities they sought to order and control.

Renewed political and historical attention has recently been paid to the period in question: that is to say, the 1630s, known by historical interpreters as the period of 'Personal Rule', the 'King's Peace', or the 'Eleven Year Tyranny' (depending usually upon the political viewpoint of the interpreter). In 1629 Charles I dissolved Parliament, with a show of elation according to the

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Butler, 'Stuart Politics in *A Tale of a Tub*', *MLR*, 85 (1990), 12-28. Butler's article acknowledges the potential for the alternative reading I am explicating in this chapter.

dispatches of the contemporary Venetian ambassador; he did not summon another until 1640. In a recent, revisionist biography of Charles during this period, Kevin Sharpe seeks to reclaim an intellectual and political reputation for the King.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the book offers lengthy and erudite readings of the political minutiae of the period, Sharpe's portrait of Charles remains a selective one of the decade and its policy-making. As the antithetical historical labels for the period indicate, polarized approaches can only tend towards an omission of evidence unfavourable to their stance.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Sharpe's book is a wholly more scholarly and wide-ranging text than that might suggest, this danger is undoubtedly one which exists in relation to *A Tale of a Tub*.

*A Tale of a Tub*, it is now generally accepted, is Jonson's last complete extant play.<sup>6</sup> Barton views the play as a nostalgic

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Sharpe records that Charles's proclamation on the dissolution of parliament in 1629 made it clear that no parliament was to meet imminently, but suggests that this did not constitute a renunciation of parliamentary government. It should be added that James VI and I had ruled for a lengthy period without government, 1614-21, but the atmosphere in 1629 was markedly distinct.

<sup>5</sup> For a counterbalance to Sharpe's revisionist approach, see Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds, *Conflict in Early Stuart England* (London and New York: Longman, 1989). For Sharpe's own recent overview, see his introductory essay, co-written with Peter Lake in their *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, pp. 1-20.

<sup>6</sup> There has been some critical debate over the exact dating of the play, prompted largely by Herford and the Simpsons' now ostensibly discredited decision to position the playtext as Jonson's earliest extant script, including it therefore in their volume of early plays (III) before even *The Case is Altered*. They argued for later additions and revisions as a means of explaining references within the text that would have been impossible to

retrospective on the veritable 'Golden Age' of Elizabeth I.

Certainly nostalgia has a role to play in *A Tale of a Tub*; a large proportion of the characters persistently dwell on or in the past, reflecting for example upon the origins of their names in the 'Scene Interloping',<sup>7</sup> but nostalgia can take a number of often conflicting roles.<sup>8</sup>

In an article on 'Late Jonson' Martin Butler suggests that antiquarianism is mocked in the plays of this period, via such characters as the Irish Nurse (in truth Lady Frampul in disguise) in *The New Inn* whose father is said to have been a Welsh herald.<sup>9</sup> There is also a herald of humorous import in *The Staple of News*, although Pennyboy Canter's reflections on the subject are significant:

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write in the 1590s. For a wholly convincing refutation of that argument, see Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

<sup>7</sup> These names are related to the trades and histories of the respective characters' godfathers - for example Rasi Clench or To-Pan the Tinker - a further instance of patriarchs writing sons. The Plato-derived argument that names reveal the essence of things was expressed by Jonson's own father-figure and Westminster School educator, William Camden, in his historical work *Britannia*. In Jonson's epigram to Camden (Epigram # 14), Martin Elsky has demonstrated how the poet uses naming nouns and adjectives with Augustan Virgilian Latin etymologies in describing his tutor; he thus identifies Camden's moral nature with classical values, see his *Authorizing Words: Speech, Writing, and Print in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> cf. a similar argument in Butler, 'Stuart Politics'.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Butler, 'Late Jonson', in *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, ed. by Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 166-88.

... do not I love a herald  
 Who is the pure preserver of descents,  
 The keeper fair of all nobility,  
 Without which all would run into confusion.  
 (*The Staple of News*, IV.iv.151-54)

For Jonson however antiquarianism was of great importance, not least due to Camden's influence, but also because it had contemporary political resonance. The etymology of the word 'radical' is telling here - it derives from the Latin for 'roots': going back to one's roots was then a politically radical move. In relation to this it is intriguing that 'interloping' in the 'Scene Interloping' carries the sense of being 'unauthorized'.<sup>10</sup> In the 1630s theories of the 'ancient constitution' and 'natural law' were to gain increasing significance; many of Jonson's close friends, not least the antiquarian John Selden,<sup>11</sup> who were spokespersons for these "rooted" or "authorized" theories would subsequently find themselves ranged on the parliamentary side in the civil wars.<sup>12</sup>

There is certainly a deep interest in and fascination with local history in this play-text: both the making and the recording of it. Coats of arms are frequently discussed (perhaps bought

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<sup>10</sup> Burt, *Licensed By Authority*, makes this point. He also describes how Jonson scarcely capitulated to the censor when criticisms were made of his satire of Inigo Jones in the character of Vitruvius Hoop. He changed the offending name but the substitute, In-and-In Medlay is scarcely less suggestive. Jonson also retained Medlay's 'Motion' at the end, a clear parody of the masque form.

<sup>11</sup> See *Underwood*, 14, 'An Epistle to Master John Selden'.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, 'Late Jonson', argues that Jonson had distanced himself from more radical figures such as Cotton and Selden by this time.

titles do indeed bring the ‘cotes’ of clowns perilously near the hallowed confines of the court)<sup>13</sup> and, like a quasi-monarch, Toby Turf, the Head Constable, has a personal scribe or chronicler in D’ogenes Scriben. Squire Tub commissions his ‘Motion’ in the final act in the manner of a monarch commissioning a masque but also as a means of recording for posterity events within his family - it is after all crucial to him that members of his household be recognized for who they really are in the midst of the performance - that refusal of the willing suspension of disbelief that for Butler characterizes the masque form.<sup>14</sup>

So there is a backward-looking element to this play’s community, and to the play itself with its 1550s or thereabouts Tudor setting. There is a degree of nostalgic reasoning behind the plot structure, since the proposed, if somewhat deferred, and eventually transferred, marriage of Audrey Turf and John Clay on this raw St. Valentine’s Day is taking place for the very reason

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<sup>13</sup> This play effects numerous puns on ‘coats’ of various kinds, emphasizing how the signs of office have become all-powerful: when feigning the role of ‘pursuivant’, Miles Metaphor is instructed by Justice Preamble to wear the coat as well as the badge of office (I.v.43); see Butler, ‘Stuart Politics’.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Butler, ‘Private and Occasional Drama’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, ed. by A.R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 127-60. Of course this ‘Motion’ is a comic version of the masque achieved by means of shadow-puppetry although as Butler stresses in ‘Stuart Politics’, the social ranks and hierarchies of quotidian life are scrupulously maintained in the seating of the audience, cf. the puppet-play admissions scene in *Bartholomew Fair*.

that Clay was her Valentine's Eve lottery selection (Chanon Hugh observes: 'I smile to think how like a lottery / These Weddings are.' (I.i.97-98)): this repeats the pattern of her own parents' coming together:

Mistress Audrey Turf  
 Last night did draw him for her valentine;  
 Which chance, it hath so taken her father and mother  
 (Because themselves drew so, on Valentine's Eve  
 Was thirty year) as they will have her married  
 Today by any means.  
 (I.i.45-50)<sup>15</sup>

Such retrospective justification as is carried out by the Turfs for marrying their daughter off takes little genuine account of Audrey's opinions. Toby may criticize John Clay's tardiness, and refuse to have music or female attendants at the ceremony, yet plays havoc with the arrangements himself when pressures of work crop up; as some of his colleagues reflect:

TO-PAN	A right good man! When he knows right, he <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">loves it.</span>
SCRIBEN	And he will know't and show't too by his place Of being High Constable, if nowhere else. <span style="display: block; text-align: right;">(II.i.60-62)</span>

In terms of a contemporary audience, if not the ostensible period setting of the play, the date looked back to by the Turfs on their Valentine anniversary (i.e. in 1633), is the anniversary of another occasion, national rather than local, since thirty years

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<sup>15</sup> The lottery motif for the selection of marital partnerships was also employed in *Bartholomew Fair*: Grace decides to choose between Quarlous and Winwife as prospective husbands by means of the lottery. In truth her strategy is designed to keep both men at bay until she is well clear of the fair and her responsibilities; as it is her plot is skillfully circumvented by Quarlous.

before the play's performance had been 1603, the year of the Jacobean accession to the English throne. James VI and I had been dead for eight years by the time of this play's composition and Jonson found himself no longer in the privileged position of quasi-court laureate. In many respects he found himself exiled in the 1630s along with James's controversial Scottish jester Archibald Armstrong (about whom Jonson had written on a number of occasions - most obviously as the 'Sea Monster Archy' in the cancelled 1624 masque *Neptune's Triumph* - see Chapter Ten). Like Armstrong, Jonson represented a Jacobean anachronism in the new Eurocentric and aestheticized English court. The pain of this exile is all too clearly spelt out in the plaintive request to Charles and his Queen, Henrietta Maria, for attention and funds in the Epilogue to *The New Inn*:

Whene'er the carcass dies, this art will live.  
 And had he lived the care of king and queen,  
 His art in something more had yet been seen.  
( *The New Inn*, Epilogue, ll.20-23)

Nostalgia alone in such depleted circumstances was surely an inadequate response: Jonson had to carve a niche for himself in this new society and therefore was forced of necessity to respond to current political issues and not to previous ones. My stress on the contemporary topicality and agitations of the late plays need not preclude a concurrent nostalgic impulse. Jonson uses the past in an effort to construct a politics of the future (this was not an

uncommon strategy: it motivated Leveller invocation of the Norman Yoke).

Anne Barton's influential nostalgia thesis, which interprets the late Jonsonian texts as harking back to the Elizabethan "Golden Age",<sup>16</sup> distracts from the urgency of the actual political moment in these texts: they are as much an 'Image of the times' as *Every Man In* had been of its own time (all of its "times": the 1601 quarto text, first performed in 1598, and the revised 1616 version).

There has been much critical speculation as to the exact fictive date and setting of *A Tale of a Tub*. Some argue for an Edwardian, some for a Marian (and therefore Catholic), some for an Elizabethan context.<sup>17</sup> Certainly Toby Turf describes himself on a few occasions as a 'Queen's man', and Edward VI is referred to as 'our late liege, and sovereign lord' (I.v.33), but there are also a wealth of potential references to post-Elizabethan actualities, under both James VI and I, and Charles I. The ambiguity is I suspect a quite deliberate Jonsonian strategy - the vagaries of application draw the attention back to the present, and therefore

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

<sup>17</sup> Barton argues for Elizabethan in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*; Marcus in *Politics of Mirth* for Marian. Butler tends to prefer the latter reading in 'Stuart Politics', but suggests the earliest days of Elizabeth's reign, when religion was still an undetermined feature of Elizabethan policy, as a viable alternative.



pressing, analogies; just like the suppressed truth of the play's prologue over the reference to 'state affairs', the past of the play is almost proof of its dealings with the present.

## II: Interhierarchical figures

*A Tale of a Tub* is a direct product of the anxieties and discontents of the subjects of Charles I. Martin Butler traces how the play depicts and explores the 'conflict between the centre and the localities, the demands of office and the demands of neighbourliness.'<sup>18</sup>

The Tudor and Stuart periods had witnessed the expansion and extension of parish officials' responsibilities and there was a growing tendency, exacerbated by the period of personal rule in the 1630s, for central authorities to place increasing demands, administrative and otherwise, on local government. Local officials were made responsible (i.e. accountable to the Crown) for such wide-ranging issues as law enforcement, watch and ward, hue and cry, control of vagrancy, road repairs and bridge maintenance, plus general social legislation, including the collection of taxes: *The Staple of News* makes passing reference to the 'busy justices' (*The Staple of News*, I.v.37).

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, 'Stuart Politics', p. 18.

The paradox inherent in ‘personal rule’ is self-evident. In actuality, it was local officialdom which bore the brunt of collecting and enforcing the unpopular extraordinary taxation levied by the Crown during this period (without having sought any form of parliamentary consent or approval, which was the expected form),<sup>19</sup> such as the Forced Loan from 1627 onwards and the infamous Ship Money after 1635.<sup>20</sup> Another paradox may be noted in that the latter tax dealt with the funding of military preparations, something of an irony in a supposed time of ‘peace’.

As the historian Valerie Pearl has written:

We are now aware that from the early sixteenth century the development of government commissions and of special and petty sessions enabled J.P.s to carry far greater burdens of administration created by an expanding range of social legislation, even if that legislation was not always translated into local action.<sup>21</sup>

In an article on county government in Caroline England, L.M. Hill has observed that ‘The powers of central government in seventeenth-century England were hollow without the active

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<sup>19</sup> Margot Heinemann makes the point that although parliament only met in this period when summoned by the monarch, nevertheless parliamentary consent over taxes was important and bitter disputes over the same provided dramatic substance from *Woodstock* in the early 1590s through to Massinger’s *King and the Subject* in 1638, see her ‘Political Drama’, in Braunmuller and Hattaway, pp. 161-205.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Cust, *The Forced Loan and English Politics, 1626-1628* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Pearl, ‘Social Policy in Early Modern London’, in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh Trevor-Roper*, ed. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), pp. 115-31 (p. 116).

cooperation of the army of local authorities upon whom enforcement depended.’<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough for *A Tale of a Tub*, Hill continues by discussing the ‘*dramatis personae*’ of county officials.

In *A Tale of a Tub* we have both a Justice of the Peace (Preamble) and a High Constable (Toby Turf), upon whom the pressures of responsibility fall, with considerable weight in the case of the latter, forced to chase around the provinces on the outskirts of London on the day of his daughter’s wedding in pursuit of fictional “robbers”. Some might argue that Toby, with an inflated sense of his own importance, creates these difficulties for himself, although perhaps a more accurate rendering of the play’s operations is to see how a distinct section of the village community acts to prevent and pervert the wedding day - that is to say, the parish gentry, such as Squire Tub, Justice Preamble, and Chanon Hugh.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> L.M. Hill, ‘County Government in Caroline England, 1625-1640’, in *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. by Conrad Russell (London: Macmillan, 1973; repr. 1991), pp. 66-90 (p. 66).

<sup>23</sup> Butler, ‘Stuart Politics’, suggests *A Tale of a Tub* is condescending in its approach to those who are not of the parish gentry and that the latter have all the wit, but I would suggest that such figures as Tub and his mother, and the Justice are seen as machinatory and disruptive forces in the play. That this disruption comes from crown-appointed officials or aristocracy is significant for the politics of this play which I see in a more subversive vein than Butler.

Nevertheless, the High Constable has a high self-opinion: Toby compares himself to Caesar in a gross exaggeration of office (although it is interesting to think of how Jonson's own dramatic renderings of Caesars - Augustus in *Poetaster* and Tiberius in *Sejanus* - themselves act as absolutists in non-absolutist situations). Toby manages to imaginatively translate the role of Roman Consul (held by all of the Caesars named above) into that of an early modern High Constable, with a little assistance from his chronicler:

SCRIBEN	I can tell you A thousand of great Pompey, Caesar, Trajan, All the High Constables there.
TURF	That was their place: They were no more.
SCRIBEN	Dictator and High Constable Were both the same.
MEDLAY	High Constable was more, though! He laid Dick Tator by the Heels.

(III.vi.17-22)

There is an interesting analogue to Toby's absolutist patriarchal self-renderings in Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, a play written in 1625 but published the same year as *A Tale of a Tub*, when the barman Tapwell declares:

There dwells, and within call, if it please your worship,  
A potent monarch, call'd the constable.  
That does command a citadel, call'd the stocks;  
(*A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, I.i.12-14)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Massinger, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, in *Selected Plays of Philip Massinger*, ed. by Colin Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

Massinger's play also features its own corrupt Justice of the Peace in the corpulent shape of Justice Greedy, so the exploitation of local office was clearly a prevalent concern of early Stuart culture.

As Pearl continues, 'As the temporal power of the Church declined, the activities of the secular courts and lay magistrates expanded, particularly in towns, magistrates grew more sensitive to public opinion . . . .'<sup>25</sup> Toby Turf, of course, proves painfully sensitive (or susceptible) to public opinion - which he comes to learn is a less than homogenized entity, changing his mind innumerable times over the suitability of John Clay as a bridegroom for his daughter (having little if any recourse to her view in this matter, as we have stated), vacillating and procrastinating as each new rumour or spurious piece of evidence is proffered up to him by the play's community. On one occasion he even attempts to resign and then immediately reassumes his post of High Constable. In one sense Toby's flexibility could be viewed as a positive response to the *vox populi* but it also renders the authoritarian if not entirely absolutist position of the High Constable dangerously malleable, and disorder duly ensues.

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<sup>25</sup> Pearl, p. 116.

Martin Butler also focuses on the social dilemma that exists for Toby since he is an ‘interhierarchical figure’,<sup>26</sup> under especial strain because of his answerability to both Crown and people, dual and conflicting loyalties to centralized government and local custom, let alone the demands of good neighbourliness. Possibly we can read Jonson himself as just such an ‘interhierarchical figure’, with his middle-class, artisanal background and contrasting Court position (during the Jacobean period at least); certainly in his role as a dramatist he faced numerous clashes with the very authority that granted him his position as poet. Jonson’s personal dilemmas might make for the depth of understanding of Toby’s that Butler suggests is contained within the play. Toby embodies in many respects early modern and quintessentially 1630s fragmentation - thus symbolizing the coexistence of two opposed concepts of order in the provinces at this time: the centralized and absolutist, and the communal and to a large extent democratic. This is the same clash of the official and unofficial sources of both culture and authority that lies at the heart of *Bartholomew Fair*. There, Justice Overdo and his attendant clerks and constables find themselves struggling against the tide of public activity at the fair itself, activity governed by

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<sup>26</sup> The phrase is Joan Kent’s from her book, *The English Village Constable, 1580-1642: A Social and Administrative Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

internally (locally), informally agreed and determined norms and customs.

Ian Donaldson has referred to the image of 'Justice in the Stocks' as central to the 'upside-down world' of comedy and carnival;<sup>27</sup> *Bartholomew Fair* evidently fits this description, with Justice Overdo, disguised in motley, being subjected to various indignities, not least being literally placed in the stocks, and at the end of the play being exposed as a mere mortal, an everyman in fact, as his forename Adam might imply, and not the privileged individual he considered himself to be. In IV.iv., the watch enters the fairground and the stage-scene puffed up with the pride of their responsibility in a manner suggestive of Toby himself: 'Why, we be his Majesty's Watch, sir.' (*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.iv.193).<sup>28</sup> Bristle, Haggis, and Whit are scarcely admirable members of Jacobean society, drunken and disorderly as they are; in this

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<sup>27</sup> Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, suggests they represent, along with Overdo, such figures as Chief Justice Coke who sought at this time to curb and constrain royal prerogative by asserting their legal rights. Bristle and Haggis are confused in their pursuit of their office by the absence of legitimizing authority, that is to say the local Justice of the Peace, Adam Overdo. In this they are akin to the madman Trouble-all, who will do nothing without the Justice's warrant: we have in Peter Womack's terms (see Womack, *Ben Jonson*) a state of 'suspended magistracy' (he traces a series of patterns in Jonson's plays, such as *Poetaster*, *Sejanus*, and *Every Man In*, which he articulates in terms of the absences and returns of legitimate authorities. Each of these plays involves the suspension of the function of the magistrate. *A Tale of a Tub* is an interesting variation on this; Toby suspends patriarchal responsibilities in favour of magisterial ones).

respect Jonson is continuing a lengthy dramatic tradition of the trope of the drunken or stupid Watch, stemming partly from John Lyly's *Endymion* and famously pursued via the hilarious, if occasionally profound, misunderstandings of Dogberry and company in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Joan Kent has discussed the way in which this particular stage tradition has contributed to a general and unwarranted reputation for constables of being either stupid or bad at their jobs;<sup>29</sup> whilst real-life examples of constabulary mishaps undoubtedly exist that rarely tells the whole story.

In *A Tale of a Tub* High Constable Turf is not the sole authority or administrator; in fact the play offers a very detailed depiction of the administrative mechanisms of an early modern village or province. Toby is undoubtedly its epicentre, but we also have a number of other clearly-defined positions and offices of responsibility. As Chanon Hugh outlines when he informs Squire Tub of the proposed Valentine's Day matrimonials (and note how everyone is defined by social status and standing):

Your mistress,  
Is to be made away from you this morning,  
Saint Valentine's Day: there are a knot of clowns,  
The Council of Finsbury, so they are ystyled,  
Met at her father's. All the wise o'th'hundred:  
Old Rasi Clench of Hampstead, petty constable;  
In-and-In Medlay, cooper of Islington,  
And headborough, with loud To-Pan the tinker,

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<sup>29</sup> See Kent, *The English Village Constable*.



Or metal-man of Belsize, the thirdborough;  
 And D'ogenes Scriben, the great writer of Chalcot.  
 (I.i.30-39)

This, then, is the 'petty hierarchy' of the play.

### III: An early modern village community

In terms of the social pyramid of this play the Justice of the Peace (Preamble) stands at the head in terms of authority. In literary terms the preamble forms the prologue to the text: it frames and surrounds the localized text. We can view Preamble's social presence in a related manner, and that Jonson draws attention to preambles in this way confirms the importance of this play's Prologue with which I commenced this chapter. A preamble also possessed all the philosophical tease implicit in the notion of a 'preface'. Preambles, coming first, require something to precede. Justice Preamble is constantly seeking points or persons of opposition in the play with whom to compete and Jonson himself used the preface form in a similar fashion in his career - I am thinking in particular of the ongoing debate on the masque form and the question of revelry that he and Samuel Daniel carried out via the medium of their masque prefaces in the early Stuart period.

The office of J.P. was a Crown, or more specifically Privy Council, appointed position. The Lord Chancellor nominated J.P.s and it was regarded as a great honour to be offered the role; it usually entailed high standing in the represented community. Sharpe reveals that in the 1630s in particular the role of J.P. was invariably taken up by many disenfranchised members of parliament after Parliament was dissolved in 1629.<sup>30</sup> Their grievances were now carried back into the communities which had previously elected them as their representative officials.<sup>31</sup> This would indicate some likelihood of their popularity and standing in the communities concerned and may also suggest a degree of independence of thought in the 1630s - independent that is of the Crown which they supposedly represented. Preamble's popularity may be questionable but he undoubtedly exhibits independence of action. As already suggested, in *A Tale of a Tub* the two highest nodal points in the community, that is to say the local Squire and the Justice, are also the two people who devise and perpetrate all the stratagems - those intended to pervert the wedding festivities and seemingly the course of

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<sup>30</sup> Sharpe, *The Personal Rule*.

<sup>31</sup> Heinemann, 'Political Drama', is at pains to stress that although the House of Commons was made up of elected representatives, it was nevertheless a far from public forum; there was no right of free speech in Parliament and the reporting of the proceedings was forbidden.

justice - through purely selfish or egotistical motives (a covert comment on personal rule?).<sup>32</sup>

For all his parodic intentions, Jonson is typically exact in his research into the political offices he invokes in the course of the play. Each J.P. had a Clerk of the Peace; in *Every Man In(F) Justice* Clement's is Roger Formal who is tricked by the ingenious Brainworm into both intellectual and actual nakedness since he is so over-eager to hear Brainworm's concocted tales of military exploits - a mirror, of course, of Matthew and Stephen's fascination with the equally false soldier Bobadill in the same play. The formality of the clerk's office is thus easily exposed as a surface matter vulnerable to manipulation. In *A Tale of a Tub* Preamble's clerk is the equally vulnerable Miles Metaphor. His is another textually referential name; unfortunately, like the fluid rhetorical figure of metaphor, Miles is not clearly defined. He is redetermined by successive interlocutors, reappropriated to their purpose(s). Employed in the plot of one character, Miles readily

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<sup>32</sup> In truth Justices rarely fare well in Jonson; as well as poor Overdo in *Bartholomew Fair*, we have the easily gulled and personally ambitious (if somewhat equivocal) figure of Sir Paul Eitherside in *The Devil is an Ass*. In the Folio version of *Every Man In* we have Justice Clement who despite the implications of his name produces famously arbitrary sentencing. Preamble is of course as machinatory as those he is meant to prosecute and holds little respect for his rustic neighbours and colleagues; as he tells Chanon Hugh:

You are my learned, and canonic neighbour,  
I would not have you stray; but the incorrigible  
Nott-headed beast, the clowns, or constables,  
Still let them graze; eat salads, chew the cud:  
(I.v.20-23)

confesses it to the next and so becomes a participant in their schemes. It is Miles who is dressed up as a ‘pursuivant’, that is to say a Messenger of the Crown (the Privy Council to be exact): aptly enough he borrows a friend’s costume to do so, one act of redefinition in the wake of another. He is thus able to feign the arrest of Squire Tub on Preamble’s behalf in order to thwart Tub’s pursuit of Audrey.

Preamble’s evident abuse of his Privy Council-derived position, in sanctioning a fake warrant in the particular instance of the ‘pursuivant’ scenes, exposes the ripeness of local events for confusions of this nature. Keith Wrightson has written of how J.P.s tended to delegate responsibilities downwards to the locally-derived if commission-appointed High Constables, passing the buck as it were to figures such as Toby Turf, who then found themselves ‘Mediating between the national legislative ideal and ambivalent local realities . . . [Upon them] was devolved the essential task of balancing out the needs and requirements of both provincial society and the royal government.’<sup>33</sup> Just such an interhierarchical figure is Toby Turf who faces the complicated task of extracting dissenters (such as Clay is presumed to be)

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<sup>33</sup> Keith Wrightson, ‘Two Concepts of Order: Justices, Constables, and Jurymen in Seventeenth-Century England’, in *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. by John Brewer and John Styles (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 21-46 (p. 26).

whilst remaining loyal to the local populace (including his own daughter): 'What really mattered was the maintenance of specific, local, personal relationships, not conformity to impersonal law.'<sup>34</sup> A very different kind of personal rule is being invoked through Turf's character; if the J.P. was the mouthpiece of impersonal 'personal rule' then local officials were crucial in the running and management of the parish, the manor, and the hundred.

The hundred is the unit we are faced with in *A Tale of a Tub*. It did not comprise any uniform territory but varied from region to region and was the responsibility of the High Constable named by the related Commission of the Peace: 'The high constable was the direct link between the J.P.s and the people of the hundred'.<sup>35</sup> A High Constable such as Toby Turf had three unique duties:

- i) local police authority - maintaining the watch, keeping out vagrants etc.
- ii) local works - buildings, bridges, repairs etc.
- iii) enforcing the annual wage scheme.

Petty constables, such as Rasi Clench, were elected by fellow householders, that is to say from local ranks. The post was

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Hill, p. 74.

tenable for a year but many continued to serve; they had the obvious advantage of pre-established trust and reputation. Petty constables who refused to serve could actually be prosecuted; many did refuse in the wake of the Ship Money débâcle, but in the early 1630s it was still a relatively well-thought of position:

the petty constable was the general purpose official in charge of all detection and presentment of crime in the manor, while he was also responsible for punishing the wide range of petty offences which cluttered daily life . . . .<sup>36</sup>

They were also responsible for raising hue and cry, as happens in *A Tale of a Tub* after the accusations of robbery are made against John Clay, leading to farcical events in the barn and elsewhere (sighting of the devil and all). Petty constables were also the ultimate tax collectors although this was a situation beset with problems. Many of those who were elected for office locally were illiterate, or at least only partially literate (Dogberry in *Much Ado* and Elbow in *Measure for Measure* are salient examples of this) and yet the often poor petty constable was held financially liable to pay fines for failure to make the relevant arrests, even to pay compensation to the victims of crime in some instances. Other positions in the hundred included the Headborough (In-and-In Medlay, Cooper of Islington) and Thirdborough (To-Pan the Belsize tinker). In addition to Jonson's meticulous delineation of each

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

person's office we have, to use Michael McCanles's term, the 'Jonsonian discrimination'<sup>37</sup> of their relative geographic locations and localities. Setting and status are as ever vital in Jonson's work.

Local politics were crucial to the development of early modern sensibilities, surely especially so in a period when parliament, after the stormy sessions of 1628-29 when the Petition of Right had been repeatedly introduced (much to the chagrin of Charles I), was reduced by the proroguing act of this absolutist monarch to a silenced and virtually defunct institution. Local authorities in this situation provided the only feasible arena for debate:

By the early seventeenth century Quarter Sessions had increasingly assumed the role of county forum where views could be expressed not only by members of the gentry, but also by men outside of their ranks: some of these lesser families would rise to office after 1642.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Michael McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Pearl, p. 116. I should explain a little about the Quarter Sessions at this point:

The sessions were the judicial and administrative meetings of the Commission of the Peace four times each year in principal towns throughout the county. The meetings were limited by a fourteenth century statute to a duration of three days although two day sessions were the norm . . . [They were] the *omnium gatherum* of the Shires . . . the quarter days were among the great events of the provincial calendar. Grand juries and juries of presentment [the presentment of accused criminals], the sheriff, undersheriffs [offices almost extinct by 1620 but revived under Caroline rule - another piece of present-minded "nostalgia"], bailiffs, constables, and so on throughout the petty hierarchy of the county; all of these would be present to wait upon the Justices of the Peace.' (Hill, p. 69).

#### IV: Communal identities: fictions and frictions

The communal identity of *A Tale of a Tub* is frequently compared to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play itself much concerned with class and gender tension.<sup>39</sup> Barton has presented as ‘ideal’ and ostensibly harmonious the communities of both plays,<sup>40</sup> but it seems to me that both are concerned with the fictions and attendant frictions involved in the self-presentation of just such communities.<sup>41</sup> In particular, I would argue that the community in *A Tale of a Tub* is a problematic 1630s Caroline one, for all its conscious archaisms and period 1550s, or thereabouts, setting. Like Edmund Spenser’s language in his Elizabethan epic *The Faerie Queene*, the vocabulary of this play is not a ‘realistic discourse of the times’, nor indeed ‘language such as men do use’, but rather a piece of arcane fictionalization and deliberate anachronism (Jonson was also responsible for introducing our current understanding of that word into the English language). The

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Erickson, ‘The Order of the Garter, the Cult of Elizabeth, and Class-Gender Tension in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*’, in Howard and O’Connor, pp. 116-40.

<sup>40</sup> cf. Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, and her ‘Falstaff and the Comic Community’, in *Shakespeare’s Rough Magic: Renaissance Essays in Honour of C.L. Barber*, ed. by Peter Erickson and Coppelia Kahn (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1985), pp. 131-48.

<sup>41</sup> Butler notes in ‘Stuart Politics’, that not one of the play’s rank or gender tensions has been solved by the end.



exquisitely named Hannibal Puppy is, with his appalling puns, ‘ystyled’ a classic Elizabethan stage clown, like Trinculo in *The Tempest*, long past his stage sell-by date.<sup>42</sup>

From *Bartholomew Fair* onwards Jonson did begin to exhibit a preference for observing the unities in his theatrical creations: *The Devil is an Ass*, *The Staple of News*, *The New Inn*, and *A Tale of a Tub* all conform to this pattern. The single Valentine’s Day setting of *A Tale of a Tub* has a number of significances but essentially it provides a festive holiday setting for the play; however, unlike the day’s sports in *The New Inn* or even the occurrences on Prospero’s magical island, there is no real sense in which social roles are released or liberated in *A Tale of a Tub*, despite Toby’s plaintive cry: ‘Passion of me, was ever man thus crossed? / All things run arsy-versy, upside-down.’ (III.i.1-2). Toby’s determination to cling to his public role as High Constable actually thwarts the operation of the festivities, delaying and almost cancelling the wedding on several occasions, despite the obvious expense gone to - the wedding fayre of two fat pigs and a goose grow ever colder; and the bride herself: ‘Come, father; I would we were married: I am a-cold’ (II.ii.157) (there are implications here of Audrey’s sexual frigidity).

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<sup>42</sup> cf. Julie Sanders, ‘“But a Choice of Speech”: The Role of the Professional Court Jester in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries’, unpublished article.

Unlike other carnivalesque occasions - for example, Twelfth Night or May Day - no social inversions occur here, excepting perhaps Lady Tub's upgrading of Martin Pole-cat's name to Pol-Martin in order to make him sound more aristocratic.<sup>43</sup> Despite this, Martin ultimately marries within his allotted social sphere, although Audrey, like himself, is superficially attired as a member of the aristocracy. Possibly Lady Tub engineers Pol-Martin's social metamorphosis to justify her own sexual interest: she has an apparent penchant for malleable young men, a leaning which, by all accounts, her late husband tolerated. Sir Peter in some respects forms a focus of the play's nostalgia but his memory is subtextually tainted as we shall observe later - a subtext hinted at by the slippage of his name into the foundation of his family fortune, which is the manufacture of saltpetre (pronounced 'salt-peter') into gunpowder.<sup>44</sup>

There are other slippages of nomenclature in the play, not least of Justice Preamble's name. Earlier I discussed the linguistic applications of his title but in the text he is persistently referred to as Justice 'Bramble'. In an intertextual sense this is rather

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<sup>43</sup> Butler, 'Stuart Politics', stresses how tenaciously Lady Tub clings to her rank, ostentatiously wearing a velvet gown and employing Pol-Martin as her gentleman-usher.

<sup>44</sup> For a brief history of the gunpowder industry, see Montague S. Giuseppe, 'Gunpowder', in *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: Surrey*, ed. by H.E. Malden (London: James Street, 1905), II, pp. 306-28.

unfortunate since regular Jonsonian theatregoers were likely to pick up the hint of Bramble, the corrupt lawyer in Jonson's earlier collaborative text *Eastward Ho* (1605), and therefore to consider the possibility (almost immediately confirmed) of the Justice's less-than trustworthy nature. It also suggests texts Pre-Bramble as it were, pre-1605, and there is certainly a constant drive in Jonson's work to reappropriate previous texts. Perhaps the nostalgia that is most active here is theatrical rather than social.

Reflections on nomenclature are however only individual examples of slippage: in the play at large people cling to their social titles for fear of the slippage of authority or identity. That action constitutes an anti-festive movement; characters decline the day's offered release from, or relaxation of, the rules, through a concern for resulting chaos. As it is, albeit inadvertently, such rigidity causes worse disorder as Toby charges off after fictional robbers.

Audrey declines Squire Tub's insistent sexual advances because of his difference in rank: a gesture akin to that of Anne Page's father in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where he rejects Fenton's proposal to marry Anne partly due to fear that a debauched aristocracy might seek to lean on his hard-earned "citizens" wealth. The goldsmith's son, Plutarchus, is similarly

suspicious of gentrification in *The Devil is an Ass*. Audrey is clearly influenced in her actions by her father who declares:

The Squire Tub  
Is a fine man, but he is too fine a man,  
And has a Lady Tub too to his mother:  
I'll deal with none o'these vine silken Tubs:  
John Clay and cloth-breech for my money, and daughter.  
(I.iv.26-30)

Toby is, as his name suggests, anxious to deal with things 'on his own turf' but his order of priority here is telling; Audrey can scarcely be blamed for being so surface in her own demands. She wants only to be dressed like a lady and that is exactly what Pol-Martin achieves for her, borrowing the clothes for the purpose from his mistress's wardrobe. Since Pol-Martin's gentrification is a surface affair, it seems fitting that his marriage should be also. He and Audrey are well-matched in the lottery of life.

Toby resists Tub's advances towards his daughter, and she obediently mimics his actions, partly due to endogamy - group loyalty that is desirous of in-rank marriage. Lady Tub enacts similar resistance to her son's sexual interest in the lower-class Audrey. Class separatism of this nature and the tenacious clinging to social rank in this play is ultimately why I wish to argue against Butler's "contained" reading of *A Tale of a Tub*. Invoking a line of argument akin to the entrapment theory often used to criticize New Historicist theories of power and ideology in early modern drama, Butler declares that 'Jonson designs an action in

which potentially damaging collisions between power and good neighbourliness continuously threaten but ultimately tensions are defused and turn out to be only the consequences of tricks and knaveries.’<sup>45</sup> This for Butler contributes towards a theatrical enhancement of Stuart kingship rather than a critique of it: any foolishness in the play is, he suggests, seen as the villagers’ and this underlines the need for the external authority of the crown. But need a “happy ending”, as I mentioned earlier, preclude the possibility of having sown the seeds of dissension elsewhere in the text? When Toby Turf, for example, likens the role of High Constable to being Caesar, contemporary audiences may well have laughed, not least at Medley’s assumption that “Dick Tator” was a genuine individual, but was it so far a leap of the imagination to consider that in 1633 there was a real person who used the title of Caesar in order to rhetorically aggrandize his position, and that very possibly his attempt to rule without parliament came close to constituting a form of dictatorship? These thoughts are only “contained” in that they are obliquely prompted. Certainly the play was ‘not likte’ at court, perhaps because, John Lemly suggests, ‘Without the compliments of masque or the refinements

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<sup>45</sup> Butler, ‘Stuart Politics’, p. 24.

of romance, *A Tale of a Tub* both flouted the Court's tastes and implicitly impugned its integrity.'<sup>46</sup>

I am unconvinced that the tensions are marginalized in *A Tale of a Tub*. The Totten Court setting (its name surely implying an alternative to the official Court?) stands in uncomfortable proximity to London. Provincial unrest would not take long to reach the enclaves of Westminster in the 1640s; as already suggested, the tensions of the localities would prove crucial during the political unrest of the following decade. Keith Wrightson has compared the operations of local government in two distinct areas: South Lancashire, conservative and geographically removed from Westminster and therefore from oppositional parliamentary activities; and Essex, radical in stance and close to Westminster.<sup>47</sup> The latter, rapidly influenced by events at the London parliaments, is particularly relevant for the Finsbury Park locality of this play. The radicalism of Essex recurs frequently in the parliamentary submissions examined by Sharpe in his work on this period and that emphasizes the importance of these near-

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<sup>46</sup> John Lemly, ' "Make Odde Discoveries!": Disguises, Masques, and Jonsonian Romance', in *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan: Change and Continuity in the English and European Dramatic Tradition*, ed. by A.R. Braunmuller and J.C. Bulman (Newark, NJ and London: Associated Universities Press, 1986), pp. 131-47 (p. 142).

<sup>47</sup> Wrightson, 'Two Concepts of Order'.

London communities and the often autonomous stance they adopted on political issues.

In the light of all this it seems critically somewhat blithe to regard the social unrest and political tensions of this play as ‘theatrically transcended’, evacuating them in the process of any real portent. After all, Oliver Cromwell himself had been deeply involved in local politics in his Ely residence, demonstrating against fen drainage schemes (see Chapter Nine) and, as a local tax collector, experiencing first-hand the dual loyalties - bioregional and national - that Toby Turf struggles under in the play-text.

It could be argued in response to these observations that as a literary historian I am guilty of projecting backwards from the events of the Civil War(s), or even from the late 1630s, to a period of relative peace and social stability: that is to say (if Sharpe’s thesis is to be endorsed, and I have expressed my reservations) the co-operational early years of personal rule. Sharpe is at pains to stress the success of many of Charles’s extraordinary measures before 1635 - stating that Ship Money was collected largely without default until 1637 - but he also reveals that in the summer of 1626 the Privy Council had issued a demand for Ship Money from the coastal towns of England: so neither was Ship Money new to the 1630s, nor was it without precedent; the Elizabethan fleet that had taken Cadiz had been financed by just

such a levy. In 1626 there was admittedly little opposition to the tax; it was duly paid since the towns concerned felt vulnerable to attack. However, when in February 1628 the writs were extended from the ports to the entire realm, disquiet began to be voiced. The Deputy Lieutenants of Essex questioned the legality of the warrants and a number of other counties followed their oppositional suit, refusing to pay. Charles I was forced to withdraw the letters of extension within days of their original issue: this all casts a rather different light on Sharpe's occasionally idealistic readings of the early 1630s.<sup>48</sup> By 1633 and *A Tale of a Tub* there was already a record in England of local opposition and autonomy, and it is in this context that we need to re-evaluate Jonson's play.

The ending of the play appears to be, if not theatrically, then politically at least, a failed consolatory movement. Butler views the play as 'profoundly serviceable to the political needs of the Caroline Court in 1633',<sup>49</sup> but I see the obverse of this in operation. Not that the play in any sense constitutes a blatant attack on Cavalier personal rule in the 1630s but it does represent an astute registration of the political tensions that singular form of

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<sup>48</sup> Cust, *The Forced Loan*, offers an alternative, and convincing, reading of the late 1620s as the period in which local antagonism towards centralized coercive policies found a definite political voice.

<sup>49</sup> Butler, 'Stuart Politics', p. 28.



government was engendering: particularly in terms of the heightened responsibility it placed upon local authorities, and therefore the localized tensions it exacerbated. London is crucial to the play in the sense that audience expectations of that communal and urban setting in Jonson's work are uncharacteristically thwarted. This play's locality is even more expressedly not London than the Barnet stage-coach stop of *The New Inn* - and perhaps in a more general sense we can see Jonson's increasing exile from the political epicentre that was the Caroline capital being registered on his stages.

People's localized responsibilities are also rendered central to the play: what trades they perform - and indeed what trades their patriarchal predecessors performed - prove vital to a communal (republican?) comprehension of their 'characters', as all the excruciating puns on John Clay's profession of tile-maker indicate:

SQUIRE TUB	And what must he do?
HUGH	Cover her, they say:
	And keep her warm, sir.
	(I.i.44-45)

Elsky has suggested that Jonson 'rarely celebrates rituals of broad social communion'<sup>50</sup> and that his namings function instead as a divisive (absolutist?) measure in his texts, a force of separation

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<sup>50</sup> Elsky, p. 90.

and distinction that cuts the individual off from society; yet I would argue that the names and trades of *A Tale of a Tub* are themselves a republicanizing act.

#### V: Local exploitation

The Tub family has vested financial interests in saltpetre, a locally-mined mineral. This can be seen as exemplary of a bioregional emphasis in the play but subversive undertones attach themselves to the family inheritance.<sup>51</sup> At the very start of the play, Chanon Hugh reflects on Squire Tripoly Tub:

Sir Peter Tub was his father, a saltpetre-man;  
Who left his mother, Lady Tub of Totten  
Court, here, to revel, and keep open house in.  
(I.i.13-15)

This may seem an innocent enough quotation, allowing for a typical Jonsonian pun on the deceased master's name - Sir Peter Tub, owner of the saltpetre-works - but contemporary audiences would have been well aware that potassium nitrate, the much sought-after mineral (the Parliamentary established Commission for its retrieval was one of the few institutions not dissolved in

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<sup>51</sup> Butler mentions the possible critique embedded in the play's insistence on the source of Tub family wealth in a footnote to 'Stuart Politics', n. 13, remarking that eventual complaints against the saltpetre men who carried out searches for the mineral made their way into the Grand Remonstrance in Parliament, but he does not go on to trace the direct implications of this for our understanding of the Tub family, except to say that this sourcing of their wealth in animal dung undermines Lady Tub's self-importance and grandeur.

1629), was employed in the manufacture of gunpowder and that it was transported about the country in ‘saltpetre tubs’.

Audiences would also have been alert to the fact that in 1633 saltpetre, like Ship Money, was a contentious issue, crucial as they both were to Charles I’s war efforts against the Scots. Sharpe returns frequently to the bitterly-contested theme of saltpetre in his account of the 1630s. There were constant efforts throughout the decade to secure adequate stocks of gunpowder and houses where saltpetre was believed to exist were often searched at will (barns and dovecotes were its common sites). Such searches were essentially invasive, and often destructive, and the ‘saltpetre men’ who executed these warrants became understandably unpopular in the localities. Essex was once again, at county level, at the forefront of protests.

The subtext of Tub family wealth is then the exploitation of the localities. Lady Tub has rescued Pol-Martin from the fate of a lifetime’s labouring in the saltpetre works and her own face reflects the ravages of the saltpetre searches:

She’s such a vessel of faeces: all dried earth!  
*Terra damnata*, not a drop of salt,  
 Or petre in her! All her nitre is gone.  
 (I.v.68-70)

Here is a different kind of frigidity or sterility from Audrey’s: the very licence allowed Lady Tub has exhausted her stocks. She is akin indeed to the houses her family has ransacked for their

contents: the final confirmation of this will be when Pol-Martin ravages her wardrobe to clothe his new bride. The aristocracy in this play, like the magistracy, is subtly questioned, criticized, and exposed.

The Church undergoes similar scrutiny and exposure. Chanon Hugh commences the play with a series of secular, pagan addresses; his call to 'Bishop' Valentine is a fascinatingly anti-Laudian oath made in the very year that Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury. Hugh's involvement in the wedding appears to be governed purely by financial self-interest;<sup>52</sup> he promises to aid and abet both Squire Tub and Justice Preamble in their machinations and thus manages to secure payment from both in the distinctly secular coinage of 'angels':

I thank your Squire's worship,  
Most humbly (for the next, for this I am sure of).  
Oh for a choir of those voices, now,  
To chime in a man's pocket, and cry chink!  
One doth not chirp: it makes no harmony.  
(I.i.88-92)

Local church corruption was one of the problems Laud and Charles sought to rectify in the 1630s. Jonson could be seen to be supporting their calls for stricter regulation; conversely, he could be exposing the futility inherent in any such objective in the locally-determined provinces.

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<sup>52</sup> Lemly, 'Make Odde Discoveries!', regards Hugh as an example of 'beneficent authority' subjected only to a 'genial unveiling', like that of Adam Overdo's, but I find him far more equivocal and his statements far more spurious than that reading would imply.

Martin Butler has written a fascinating article in relation to these issues and *The Magnetic Lady* (1632).<sup>53</sup> Considering possible reasons why the play and its Blackfriars performers were subject to the scrutiny of the Court of High Commission, the highest band of ecclesiastical authority in the nation, he rejects suggestions that the figure of Parson Palate might have been a cause for concern.<sup>54</sup> Palate is undoubtedly a precursor of Chanon Hugh:

Neither conscientious nor learned, he is more interested in parish wakes and ales than he is in 'Levitic Law'(I.ii.29): he makes sure he obtains his 'blacks' - his parish dues from marriages and funerals; and he is prepared to conduct a wedding outside the canonical hours to maintain his fee intake.<sup>55</sup>

Butler suggests that the character of Palate is less an attack on Laud's reformist policies than an implicit endorsement of the need for them:

Laud was keen to improve the educational and social standing of the clergy and to free them from dependence on the gentlemen who controlled their living, but Palate, with his easygoing subservience and his concern for the comforts of the world rather than the spirit, is a clergyman of the stock that Laud was anxious to extirpate.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Butler, 'Ecclesiastical Censorship of Early Stuart Drama: The Case of Jonson's *The Magnetic Lady*', *MP*, 89 (1991-92), 469-81.

<sup>54</sup> cf. Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> Butler, 'Ecclesiastical Censorship', p. 473.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

Admittedly, were Palate the cause for official ecclesiastical concern it seems unlikely that Jonson would have risked re-prosecution just a year later; whilst the *Magnetic Lady* case was ongoing, the players were anxiously blaming the dramatist in various petitions they issued. Butler's argument, that the likely cause for complaint was an embedded and punning dialogue on Arminianism, is a convincing one but I remain uneasy over his traditionalist reading of that play as one 'that served the social ideology of Laudianism',<sup>57</sup> akin in its strategy to his reading of *A Tale of a Tub*. In both plays the operations of the stage community are central; in a sense the clergy, corrupt or otherwise, are integral to that. Policies from on high, emanating from either Charles or Laud persistently threatened the internal coherence of such communities.

Leah Marcus has suggested that *A Tale of a Tub* is an endorsement of the Caroline revival of the policy of royal endorsement of "rural, holiday pastimes" for political purposes (1633 saw the republication of King James's *Book of Sports* first published in 1617). In this respect she, like Butler, regards this as an orthodox Caroline text but also acknowledges a potential counter-reading which sees this play exposing the hypocritical appropriation of common pastimes by a government (church and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 481.

monarchy) essentially uninterested in common rights or matters.<sup>58</sup> Jonson's dramatic celebration of the communal in the play-setting of the bride-ale is a potential challenge to the confused ethics of personal rule.

## VI: Political pastoral

There were statutory prohibitions in force with regard to the representation on public theatre stages of anything amounting to contemporary Christian ceremony; however I believe the wedding ceremony of *A Tale of a Tub* needs to be seen in a similarly secular light to the prayers and procedures of Chanon Hugh. Laud and Charles I after all encouraged the ceremonies of the Church and yet here the appetite reigns, both sexual and alimentary, even on the part of the practising Chanon who hopes the bridegroom will keep Audrey 'warm'.

In truth Audrey grows ever colder and more desperate: 'Husbands, they say, grow thick; but thin are sown. / I care not who it be, so I have one.' (III.vi.43-44). Her anti-pastoral observance on the impotence of potential husbands - thin seed

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<sup>58</sup> Historical debate rages over contemporary attitudes to Laud's policies. Revisionists such as Sharpe and Russell have credited Charles himself with the policies, erecting a defence of Laud in the process. Andrew Foster calls for a more orthodox understanding of Laud's coercive approach in 'Church Policies of the 1630s', in Cust and Hughes, pp. 193-223. Jonson seems to place himself in the midst of such ambiguities.

and all - sets the tone for the frosty Valentine's Day proceedings - or perhaps, more accurately, lack of proceedings. This is a pastoral, but a very particular and peculiar version of the genre: a negative, inverted one.

A critical *donnée* of much writing on Jonson is that he never engaged with rural issues or imagery;<sup>59</sup> in truth his poetry is dominated by rural metaphors. A plethora of wood-turning images, for example, are contained in his poetry and the titles of his prose and poetry collections also bear witness to the rural aspects of his work.<sup>60</sup> The pastoral genre as a whole finds voice in his late plays such as *A Tale of a Tub* or the unfinished *The Sad Shepherd*.

Butler has suggested that whilst pastoral was a major (if not the major) genre for the court(s) of Charles I and Henrietta Maria, it was remarkable by its absence from the Jacobean canon.<sup>61</sup> A notable exception to that rule for Butler is Jonson's c.1620 masque

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<sup>59</sup> J.B. Bamborough suggests in 'The Rusticity of Ben Jonson', in Donaldson, *Jonson and Shakespeare*, pp. 135-55, that Jonson did develop an interest in country life and rustic lore but only later in his career. Leah Marcus's exposition of a number of his masques and plays in these terms (see *Politics of Mirth*) would however seem to dispute this developmental reading.

<sup>60</sup> cf. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise*.

<sup>61</sup> See also David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1984).



*Pan's Anniversary*.<sup>62</sup> Arguing that the masque engages with the European Palatinate crisis and the failures of Jacobean foreign policy, Butler says that *Pan's Anniversary* 'effectively reinvented political pastoral for the Early Stuart court and laid down its ideological parameters for the ensuing generation.'<sup>63</sup>

Absolutist pastoral was however not the entire story of the Caroline era. Butler himself has been instigatory in recognizing that many Caroline writers were appropriating the form for their own anti-establishment purposes, including Jonson's amanuensis Richard Brome.<sup>64</sup> Brome's *A Jovial Crew*, for example, written on the eve of the civil war(s) has its own hare-brained Justice and alternative community, and it is alongside texts of this nature that I am more inclined to range Jonson's.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See Butler, '*Pan's Anniversary*'.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 394. Butler regards the masque as yet further confirmation of Jonson's appropriation of convenient literary motifs in order to 'serve the political purpose of the early Stuart court' (Ibid., p.394) as well as indicating that Jonson was himself the literary precedent for the absolutist masques of the Caroline era.

<sup>64</sup> See Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*.

<sup>65</sup> In their recent adaptation of *A Jovial Crew* (1992-93 season) the Royal Shakespeare Company chose to alter the ending and thus render the drama even more left-wing and anti-establishment. In Brome's version (liable to censorship we must recall) the beggar crew is reappropriated into the community at the close by Oldrents's offer of financial aid. The RSC elected to retain some dissenters from this capitulation, even amongst the upper-class 'beggars'. They also chose to insert a scene showing the arrogant Justice Clack administering a harsh sentence to a female beggar. The result was not a travesty of Brome: it picks up some of the subtler registers of the text and renders them explicit. It is worth adding that Brome's play is clearly influenced by Jonson, both in its performative gestures towards

Annabel Patterson has shown how the utopian pastoral often invokes a dialectical dystopia;<sup>66</sup> Butler denies the operation of this paradigm in *Pan's Anniversary*. Yet pastoral also generally sees something pressurized into low-life form; metaphors are themselves under considerable pressure in *A Tale of a Tub* as the shifting fate of Miles proves. Thus far Jonson conforms to the pastoral tradition; however, in pastoral (witness Arden) there is often an absence of public official life - this is certainly not true of *A Tale of a Tub*. I agree with Butler that Jonson politicizes the form but regard the result as far more unorthodox. William Empson has written, with regard to John Gay's *The Beggars's Opera*, of "Mock-pastoral as the cult of independence" and this seems a useful term to apply to Jonson's 'negative pastoral' and autonomous local community.<sup>67</sup>

If a standard element of pastoral is a sense of the seasons, then nowhere more so in Jonson does the weather play such a

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the 1621 masque *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*, directly re-employing the figure of Patricio, as well as many of the related themes, but also, I would argue, in its consideration of self-seeking J.P.s, and alternative sources of authority and community.

<sup>66</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>67</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral: A Study of Pastoral Form in Literature* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1968), the phrase is a chapter heading. Lemly, 'Make Odde Discoveries!', regards the play as a 'mock or anti-romance', p. 141.

prominent part in proceedings than in *A Tale of a Tub*, a point beautifully captured in the opening speech:

Now o'my faith, old Bishop Valentine,  
 You ha' brought us nipping weather: *Februere*  
*Doth cut and shear*, your day, and diocese  
 Are very cold. All your parishioners,  
 As well as your laics, as your quiristers,  
 Had need to keep their warm feather-beds,  
 If they be sped of loves. This is no season,  
 To seek new makes in . . . .  
 (I.i.1-8)

A similarly chill political wind was blowing through the decade of the 1630s, the decade, as I have stressed, of Jonson's authorship of *A Tale of a Tub*; that must be regarded as critically significant, as influential upon Jonson's characterizations in fact as the weather itself. Jonson the 'interhierarchal' author could scarcely have failed to observe and exploit to dramatic effect the paradoxes and dualities of his own age regardless of the play's Tudor setting, just as his Roman tragedies do not fail to explore the tensions of the Jacobean era during which they were commissioned.

The change Jonson registered between his own recognition of 'times trans-shifting',<sup>68</sup> between the Jacobean and the Caroline era, cannot be ignored. As Patterson has convincingly argued, in an essay on poetic collections and their intended or accidental order, the point at which the poems in the posthumously published *Underwood* shift from being those composed under

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<sup>68</sup> The phrase is from Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* (1648).

James to those written under Charles is heavily signalled, not only by a date in the margin (interestingly enough not 1625, the year of Charles's accession, but 1629, the year of his prorogation of parliament and the commencement of the eleven year tyranny) but also by a correlative darkening of mood.<sup>69</sup> Surely the darker shades of this poetic forest bear witness to comparable shifts of register in the dramas of the late 1620s and early 1630s? If so, this casts Butler's reading of *A Tale of a Tub* onto less solid ground.

If a request of the parliamentary sessions finally called in 1640 was for a social contract to be negotiated with the monarch, a collective agreement established as it were between the King and his subjects (undoubtedly akin to the Articles of Agreement drawn up between author and audience in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*), then the local (vested?) interests of this rarely performed play, written just some seven years earlier, should not be underestimated.

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<sup>69</sup> Annabel Patterson, 'Jonson, Marvell, and Miscellaneity', in *Poems in their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. by Neil Freistat (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 95-118.

## CHAPTER NINE: "THE COMMONWEALTH OF HELL":

*THE DEVIL IS AN ASS*, MONOPOLIES, PROJECTIONS, AND FEN  
DRAINAGE SCHEMES OF THE LATE JACOBAN PERIOD

Echoes of Prospero's epilogue to *The Tempest* (1611) to be found in that of *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) have led literary critics up the primrose path to dalliance. 1616, they argue, marks Ben Jonson's "farewell to the stage", just as 1611 marked Shakespeare's.<sup>1</sup> They look to the crystallizing moment of print that ostensibly constitutes Jonson's *Workes* in the same year (the rather more complex ramifications of which I have explored in previous chapters), and for inclusion in which *The Devil is an Ass* came too late, as proof somehow of their assumption that Jonson sought to draw a line under his stage career, consistently recording the fact that another Ben Jonson play was not performed until 1626 and *The Staple of News*.

Surely though the intertextuality of these epilogues is more complex than such a reading suggests:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's *mine own*,  
Which is most faint. Now, 'tis true,  
I must be here confin'd by you,  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since *I have my dukedom got*,  
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell,  
But release me from my bands

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Riggs.

With the help of your good hands.  
 Gentle breath of yours my sails  
 Must fill, or else my *project* fails,  
 Which was to *please*. Now I want  
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,  
 And my ending is despair,  
 Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,  
 Which pierces so, that it assaults  
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.

As you from crimes would pardon'd be,  
 Let your indulgence set me free.

(*The Tempest*, Epilogue, ll.1-20, *Italics my own*)

Thus, the *projector* here is *overthrown*.

But I have now a *project of mine own*,  
 If it may pass: that no man would invite  
 The poet from us to sup forth tonight,  
 If the play *please*. If it displeasing be,  
 We do presume that no man will: nor we.

(*The Devil is an Ass*, Epilogue, ll.1-6, *Italics my own*)<sup>2</sup>

As the italics indicate, the verbal echoes are numerous. Prospero's request for liberating applause recalls Volpone's post-trial address of the audience in Jonson's 1606 play and possibly also Jeremy/Face's epilogue to *The Alchemist*. Jonson's own prologue to *The Devil is an Ass* had also pleaded for a positive reception of the play in hand - at least until the audience has paid a few times to see it:

If you'll come  
 To see new plays, pray you afford us room,  
 And show this but the same face you have done  
 Your dear delight, 'The Devil of Edmonton'.  
 Or if, for want of room, it must miscarry,  
 'Twill be but justice that your censure tarry  
 Till you give some. And when six times you ha' seen't,  
 If this play do not like, the devil is in't.

(Prologue, ll.19-26)

The prayer for wider receptive space is again akin to Prospero's plea not to be confined within the island setting of his play.

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<sup>2</sup> All play quotations in this chapter are from *The Devil is an Ass* unless otherwise stated.

The Shakespeare-Jonson interaction is a many-layered one that requires greater critical attention than it is usually accorded at least in the Jonson to Shakespeare direction.<sup>3</sup> What is of specific interest to me here though is how Prospero's discourse is not that of a magician or conjuror (the terms in which he is most frequently described, with links often being made to Elizabethan magus John Dee), but that of a financial projector. The theatrical experience as the Prologue to *The Devil is an Ass* shows is itself a financial negotiation based on trust and it is these fiscal and theatrical connections between Prospero and Meercraft that Jonson is highlighting.

Stephen Greenblatt's work on *The Tempest* has convincingly linked the play to the colonial projections of its age and it is on this level that its connections to Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* are most evident.<sup>4</sup> Prospero has got his dukedom by the close of *The Tempest*; only Shakespeare's theatrical project has yet to be deemed a success or failure. Meercraft's project in *The Devil is an Ass* to secure a dukedom for Fabian Fitzdottrel has patently failed, amidst numerous other failures exposed by that play. The sale of

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<sup>3</sup> See James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights*, and Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare and Jonson: Jonson and Shakespeare* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, and *Marvelous Possessions*. My thanks to Stephen Greenblatt for reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

grants and monopolies during the Jacobean and Caroline eras was highly polemical; related issues were a driving force in *The Devil is an Ass* and were treated again in *The Staple of News* (1626). Thus the decade from 1616 to 1626, so often presented by Jonsonian critics as a theatrical void, is easily bridged in both sociopolitical and intellectual terms in the connection between these two plays. This essay seeks to do just that and therefore to recover the text of *The Devil is an Ass* for more oppositional readings.

Jonson continued to pursue a theatrical career after 1616. He may have concentrated on the composition of masques for the monarch but this did not constitute a wholesale rejection of public auditoria. *The Devil is an Ass* is patently not Jonson's last play, just as *The Tempest* was not Shakespeare's. Jonson's poem on the library fire which devastated his extensive collection of books and manuscripts in 1623, 'An Execration Upon Vulcan', implies that numerous plays in progress fell victim to the flames. His theatre-work was thus delayed and deferred by the fire, but it is clear that *The Staple of News* was already in its embryonic stages in the masques of the early 1620s, just as *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*, a play commissioned by the Marquis of Buckingham in 1621, had links to *The Devil is an Ass* five years earlier. The decade was not a period of discontinuities for Jonson.



This chapter then is an attempt to retrieve the remarkable text of *The Devil is an Ass* from critical consignment to the theatrical compost heap. Watson has claimed that the drama no longer seems to be alive as a play, but states that 'it is nonetheless a valuable fossil, a sort of artifact through which we can trace the evolution of Renaissance drama.'<sup>5</sup> However in the same chapter he recognizes that the play is firmly situated within new stage traditions rather than old: 'The schemes that are outwitted and superseded in the play resemble plots that were conventional on the Elizabethan stage: the ones that outwit and supersede them look ahead to Restoration and Eighteenth century theater.'<sup>6</sup> By implication Watson appears to reject Barton's by now familiar nostalgia theory,<sup>7</sup> placing the text instead in a far more contemporary schema, of the kind mapped out for the late Jonsonian plays by D.F. McKenzie when he declares that, 'The social conscience is as alert as ever . . . .'<sup>8</sup> McKenzie goes on to say

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<sup>5</sup> Watson, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> She introduces *The Devil is an Ass* in her chronological critical history in *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, with the remark: 'For the first time in his career as a dramatist, Jonson betrays an ambition that looks very like nostalgia . . . .' (p. 22).

<sup>8</sup> D.F. McKenzie, 'The Staple of News and the Late Plays', in *A Celebration of Ben Jonson*, ed. by William Blissett, Julian Patrick, and R.W. Van Fossen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 83-128 (p. 87).

that Jonson's 'efforts to write a drama for his own times are clearly seen in his formal innovations and are explicit in the way he supersedes older theatrical forms in the very act of using them anew.'<sup>9</sup> He concludes that Jonson's movement is 'ineluctably elitist and escapist'<sup>10</sup> and with that particular point I am inclined to disagree, preferring to invoke Butler's retrievalist anti-escapist readings of Brome by way of comparison.<sup>11</sup> A similar reading of Jonson allows for more oppositional tendencies: tendencies which Jonsonian critics, including Butler himself, have tended to suppress, and which may have been an influence upon Brome. This action automatically recovers *The Devil is an Ass* from the nostalgic limbo to which Barton's thesis had consigned it and accepts that the text operates on and within contemporary sociopolitical and theatrical spheres.

Recent literary criticism has begun to register the theatrical innovations implicit in the conscious anachronisms of *The Devil is an Ass* ; the same sphere of anachronistic expectation is exploited in the responses of the gossips in *The Staple of News*. Watson echoed McKenzie's term for Jonson's 'superseding' of the older

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> See Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*.

dramatic forms and Peter Womack has spoken of the 'interstylistic' nature of this play, with its invocations and inversion of the mystery and morality traditions:<sup>12</sup>

Pug's journey from hell to London is thus an interstylistic one: he enters the new theatre, the 'image of the times', as an emissary from the old. He does so on the new theatre's terms: he is in London for one day only, and not in an 'airy' manifestation, but in an existing human body (made available by a hanging at Tyburn) in which he is 'subject / To all impression of the flesh' (I.i.134-8).<sup>13</sup>

Jonson invokes personal history here since he nearly hanged at Tyburn for murder, escaping only by virtue of "neck-verse",<sup>14</sup> and forever bearing a branded thumb to tell the tale. The exploitation of the Aristotelian doctrine of the unities which 'demanded' that events occur within the confines of a single day is also important: Jonson was to use the technique, as Shakespeare had in *The Tempest*, and as he himself had in *Bartholomew Fair*, again in *The New Inn* (1629) and *A Tale of a Tub* (1633). *The Devil is an Ass* is partially a summary of Jonsonian innovation to date; links with many past plays are evident - *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair* are perhaps the most obvious. Jonson is providing this summation not as a farewell to theatre but rather

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<sup>12</sup> In a manner akin to *Bartholomew Fair* where Ursula's booth operates as a modern version of the mystery play hell-mouth.

<sup>13</sup> Womack, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> An ability to read the psalms in Latin which allowed for evasion of a death sentence.

as a statement of his theatrical present: “such a dramatist am I at this given moment in 1616.”

The word ‘devil’ takes on an Empsonian complexity in the text.<sup>15</sup> Satan is a devil and therefore a devil can be the ultimate master, the director of events; but Pug too is a devil, in the sense that we today employ the phrase “poor devil” as an expression of sympathy or pity: he is a ‘petty puisne’ devil, a junior member of the ‘commonwealth of hell’. To be in hell in his instance may be to be always subservient to others, as he proves to be in London (freshers at Oxbridge colleges in the 1950s were said to “devil” for their elders, as are those who do background research for lawyers: this has interesting connotations for the legal themes of this play - we still employ the phrase “the Law is an Ass”). Pug is a devil because he believes, albeit mistakenly, that he can better himself; he discovers that others are greater devils, but they are devils because they also, mistakenly, believe they can better themselves. That is why the devil is an ass because devils take on themselves burdens they are too foolish to sufficiently estimate - Meercraft’s schemes, Fitzdottrel’s dreams.

Pug is an incarnation not only of a failed actor (Jonson nearly hanged for the murder of an actor) but also of a failed

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<sup>15</sup> cf. William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964). He does not look specifically at ‘devil’ although the working premise and the chapters on ‘dog’ are revealing.

dramatist: it is Satan himself who proves the ‘master of players’ (V.viii.78), the arch-playwright of this drama. Dispatching his junior devil to London, Satan makes it clear that the only places he will feel at home are the taverns where the former court jesters and licensed fools have been ‘exiled’. Devilry is another trade in decline and in order to get back into credit Pug must prove himself in London. In truth he finds himself at the receiving end of intrigues he supposed himself to be initiating - Satan seemingly envisages this at the outset, telling Pug he is ‘not for the manners, nor the times:’ (I.i.120). London indeed proves trickier and more self-serving than the ‘commonwealth of hell’.

Another inversion is also evident - that of the Aristophanic journey from Athens to hell which takes place in the opening scenes of *The Frogs*. Aristophanes’ influence on Jonson has been acknowledged elsewhere: Barton has observed that it is clear that Jonson possessed a copy of his plays at some point in his lifetime (the copy (Geneva, 1607) rests in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), although she does not trace this particular line of influence in any detail herself.<sup>16</sup> *The Devil is an Ass* shares a common structural device with most Aristophanic comedies, that is a pronounced midway break that leads to the introduction of new characters (in this instance Gilthead and company at III.i.)

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

and an increased pace of staged events (other Jonson plays such as *Epicoene*, *The New Inn*, and *Every Man In* exhibit similar structural tendencies). *The Frogs* is an exception here but Pug's tribulations certainly seem to echo those of Xanthius as well as other Aristophanic projectors and slaves. In *The Frogs*, a play fascinatingly enough concerned with the resuscitation and resurgence of old dramatic forms, and indeed dramatists in the shape of Euripides and Aeschylus, the connections between Athens and Hell are made paramount to the audience - in contemporary performances the audience would have been composed of Athenians and the open-air performances would have rendered the city itself a permanent backdrop to proceedings. This is directly comparable to London's function in this rather unusual Jonsonian "city" comedy:

The 'natural' reason why the devil is an ass is inverted: it's not that the new theatre presents a real world in which the visitor from the old is exposed as an extravagant fiction, but that the visitor is real and for that very reason helpless among the layers of false appearance which make up the image of the times. Jonson has dramatized the passage from emblem to image, from the theatre of religious allegory to the secular theatre of illusion. But the latter is denaturalized by its constant teasing consciousness of, precisely, illusion . . . the devil device, while very broadly parodying the moralities, also estranges the image of the modern city.<sup>17</sup>

Pug's 'prayers' to go home are well documented:

You talk of a university! Why, Hell is  
A grammar school to this!  
(IV.iv.170-71)

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<sup>17</sup> Womack, p. 45.

All  
 My days in Hell were holy-days to this!  
 (IV.iv.222-23)<sup>18</sup>

They contribute to the play's general drive to render spectators into a heightened state of awareness about their conditions of existence and reception. A related strategy lies behind the metatheatrical aspects of Fitzdottrel's constant desire to see a performance of *The Devil is an Ass*, unaware of the consummate performance he is of course giving in it - a typical aspect of Jonsonian cuckolds caught up as they are in their own fantastic dreamscapes and unable to see reality: Fitzdottrel's obvious precedent here is Corvino in *Volpone*. But Pug's prayers also keep the significance of the London setting to the forefront of audience imaginations.

Jonsonian central acts invariably constitute important architectural features in terms of a play's structure. As already stated, Act III of *The Devil is an Ass* provides an Aristophanic-style break whilst introducing a whole new plot-line and pace via the introduction of Gilthead the goldsmith and his son Plutarchus. Gilthead named his son in a fit of literary inspiration:

That year, sir,  
 That I begot him, I bought Plutarch's *Lives*,

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<sup>18</sup> The Gamini Salgado edition of *The Devil is an Ass*, in *Four Jacobean City Comedies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), has 'holidays' for 'holy-days'. Salgado's edition, previously the only modern-spelling edition available, does differ vastly from the Happé edition on a number of occasions. Jonson certainly liked to stress the sacred etymology of 'holiday' as a 'holy-day', cf. similar puns in the masque, *Pan's Anniversary*.

And fell so'in love with the book as I called my son  
 By'his name, in hope he should be like him  
 And write the lives of our great men!  
 (III.ii.21-25)

Gilthead intends that his son should write of the lives of great citizens, that is the contemporary London equivalent of classical Greek and Roman republican heroes. Plutarchus is indeed a great defender of citizens' rights in the face of aristocratic criticism and debauchery - he criticizes the way in which poverty-stricken aristocrats marry wealthy citizens' daughters and so produce a 'mongrel breed' (similar to those fears expressed by Audrey Turf and her father in *A Tale of a Tub*). But Plutarchus's name also means 'reign of, or origin in, gold' and in this too he remains true to the mercantile values of his rank. The scene as a whole provides a central encounter between London's paradoxical mercantile and "gentle" values and raises the question that this play as a whole agitates: that if ancestry and lineage no longer dictated the achievement of state office would money then win out? Plutarchus is after all easily won over by Meercraft's seductive discourse to the notion of life as a captain in the militia and Jonson's pejorative opinion of that institution is clear from complex poems such as 'A Speech according to Horace', where the opening lines mimic the boasts of volunteer citizen-soldiers.<sup>19</sup> If

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<sup>19</sup> My thanks to Jeremy Maule for his discussions of this and other Jonson poems with me.



Everill is representative in this scene of a debauched aristocracy then mercantile values do not appear to proffer any utopian or truly republican alternative.

Stephen Greenblatt first observed the link between emblematic theatre and Catholicism.<sup>20</sup> He has demonstrated how the Jacobean authorities were involved in trying to ‘empty out’ or evacuate the supernatural element from the rituals of possession and exorcism, in the process reducing them to containable theatrical performances. This was a policy enacted upon Jesuits and Puritans alike and not simply an anti-Catholic gesture. These attempts at evacuation led to the notorious “show trials” of the period which sought to expose the ‘stage taint’, to use the Greenblattian term, of the unofficial spectacle that public displays of possession constituted. The most famous written accounts of these are to be found in the work of Samuel Harsnett.

In 1603, when he was chaplain to the Bishop of London, Harsnett wrote a detailed record of the trials of a group of English catholic priests who had, as outlaws, performed a ‘series of spectacular exorcisms’;<sup>21</sup> his account was based on the sworn statements of the accused and entitled *A Declaration of Egregious*

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<sup>20</sup> See Greenblatt, ‘Loudun and London’, and his ‘Shakespeare and the Exorcists’ in *Shakespearean Negotiations*.

<sup>21</sup> Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 94.

*Popish Impostures* and it has long been recognized that Shakespeare used the text in *King Lear* (1605), not least in the scenes relating to Edgar's "possession". The following year Jonson too employed Harsnett in his own reductive portrait of the legal system in *Volpone*.

Greenblatt has described Harsnett's *Declaration* as part of the 'attempt by the established and state-supported Church of England to eliminate competing religious authorities by wiping out pockets of rivalrous charisma.'<sup>22</sup> Charisma was not a purely Catholic domain: in 1599 Harsnett had also authored a text entitled *A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrel*. In the 1590s the authorities had grown deeply concerned by the activities of a charismatic Puritan preacher, John Darrel. Through fasting and prayer he had assisted in the exorcism of Thomas Darling who was popularly known as the 'Boy of Burton'; Darrel had gone on to further "success" in the case of the mass possession of the 'Seven in Lancashire'. Alarmed, the authorities sought a means of exposing Darrel; in 1598 they found their means - William Somers, aged 21 and a musician's apprentice in Nottingham, who was being exorcised by Darrel in yet another series of public spectacles. Evidently under great pressure from the aforesaid authorities, Somers "confessed" to imposture and in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

a complicated trial, that by Harsnett's own account featured various recantations and reconfessions, Darrel was himself "exposed" as a charlatan. The trial's own vocabulary was predominantly theatrical - it spoke of theatre, plays, acting, and dumbshow - and Harsnett exploited this feature in his written account, where he describes the exorcisms as 'stage plays' and 'tragicomedies'.

The influence of this trial and Harsnett's written version of it on the trial scenes of *Volpone* is self-evident; recantations and reconfessions are the order of the day in the Venetian Senate, as Volpone (believed dead) persuades the lawyer Voltore, in a cunning aside, to feign a fit of possession in order to excuse before the court his former 'confession' to perjury:

VOLPONE	Sir, you may redeem it. They said you were possessed; fall down, and seem so: I'll help to make it good.
	<i>VOLTORE falls</i> God bless the man! (Stop your wind hard, and swell). See, see, see, see! He vomits crooked pins! his eyes are set, Like a dead hare's, hung in a poulter's shop! His mouth's running away! do you see, signior? Now, 'tis in his belly.
CORVINO	(Ay the devil!)
VOLPONE	Now, in his throat!
CORVINO	(Ay, I perceive it plain.)
VOLPONE	'Twill out, 'twill out: stand clear. See, where it flies! In shape of a blue toad, with a bat's wings! Do you not see it, sir?
CORBACCIO	What? I think I do.
CORVINO	'Tis too manifest.
VOLPONE	Look! he comes t'himself!
VOLTORE	Where am I?
VOLPONE	Take good heart, the worst is past, sir. You are dispossessed.

(*Volpone*, V.xii.21-35)

The connection between the devil and the theatre is similarly exploited in *The Devil is an Ass* where once again we have a feigned possession, engineered by Meercraft and company, supposedly on Fitzdottrel's behalf: this is in a play where all the 'marvelous possessions' ventured by the charismatic Meercraft are themselves 'acts' and counterfeits. Meercraft has clearly read Harsnett, since it is a literary source he cites; the precedent invoked is clearly that of John Darrel:

. . . roll but wi' your eyes,  
And foam at th'mouth. A little castle-soap  
Will do't, to rub your lips: and then a nutshell,  
With tow and touchwood in it to spit fire.  
Did you ne'er read, sir, little Darrel's tricks,  
With the boy o'Burton, and the seven in Lancashire,  
Sommers at Nottingham? All these do teach it.  
And we'll give out, sir, that your wife has bewitched you -  
(V.iii.2-9)

These "possession" scenes expose the specious inter-translatability of all practices involving either the claim to possess or to decode inspiration. In the context of both *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass* the theatricality implicit in the presentation of the law and its claims is also exposed. In *The Devil is an Ass*, the Justice of the Peace Paul Eitherside (his very name implies translatability) is utterly convinced by Fitzdottrel's performance: 'Tis a clear conspiracy! / A dark, and devilish practice!' (V.viii.56-57), although as a party with vested interests in many of Meercraft's monopolies, it is easy to see why Eitherside might be inclined to such a reading.

Jonson's own audiences are alerted to the imposture by the backstage preparations being made visible onstage; we might like to compare this with Brecht's onstage robing of the new Pope in *Life of Galileo*, another play full of trials and recantations.

Fitzdottrel even elects to laugh like the devil figures he has seen on the stage in productions of mystery plays: 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, & c.!' (V.viii.28): the same theatrical cliché with which Jonson's Satan commenced his "anti-mystery" play.

Chapter Eight discussed at length Jonson's specific interest in the figure of the Justice of the Peace and the questionable operations of early modern law, but there is further significance to the figure of Sir Paul Eitherside, J.P. Leah Marcus has suggested that his character in part represents two judges who were close associates of Lord Chief Justice Edward Coke - Sir Humphrey Winch, Justice of the Common Pleas, and Sergeant Randal (or Ranulph) Crew. These two had been involved in the notorious trial and execution of nine Leicestershire women falsely accused by a thirteen year old boy, John Smith, of witchcraft in 1616.<sup>23</sup> Meercraft himself makes specific reference to these events:

Sir, be confident,  
'Tis no hard thing t'outdo the Devil in:  
A boy o' thirteen year old made him an ass  
But t'other day.  
(V.v.48-51)

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<sup>23</sup> See Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*.

King James VI and I himself had exposed the boy as a fake during his summer progress of that year, thus saving the lives of a further six accused women; the tale became the dominant theme of London gossip by the autumn and Jonson's play exploits this fact. Crew and Winch, and by association Coke, were duly disgraced.

Read in this way *Eitherside* can be seen as an exposé of the law and a consolidation of royal prerogative of which Coke was a notorious opponent but this perhaps belies the greater subtleties and critiques which Marcus also sees functioning within this play. In an article on the multifarious topical references of *The Devil is an Ass*, Robert C. Evans suggests that *Eitherside* constitutes a direct parody of Coke, and in particular of his highly ambivalent role in initially supporting, and then abandoning, Alderman Cockayne's notorious project to curtail the Merchant Adventurers' monopoly on the exportation of cloth to Europe (essentially for his private gain) in the years leading up to 1616. There are certainly a number of satirical references to aldermen in the play.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Robert C. Evans, 'Contemporary Contexts of Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*', *CompD*, 26 (1992), 140-76. Evans's admirably exhaustive article examines Jonson's own (no longer extant) contribution of speeches to a welcoming dinner held for James himself by Cockayne. The King too is implicit in the rapid turnaround of establishment attitudes to the Alderman's project; this makes *The Devil is an Ass*'s language of projection less obvious in its consolidation of James.

Peter Happé's very recent edition of *The Devil is an Ass* endorses the reading of Eitherside as Coke but there is a further figure to add to those justices and judges of whom the confused J.P. can be said to be a creative dramatic amalgam. In addition to Harsnett's written account of the Darrel trial, Darrel's own sworn statements were recorded in a collection under the title, *The Triall of Maister Darrell, or a collection of Defences against Allegations Not Yet Suffered to Receive Convenient Answer* (1599); in one of these he directly addressed the presiding Justice. The judge on this occasion was Justice Popham who was later, as Lord Chief Justice, to preside over the trial of the Gunpowder plot conspirators. Jonson's own involvement in events leading up to this trial have been dealt with by critics,<sup>25</sup> not least by Riggs who records how Jonson, having been seen drinking with Robert Catesby only weeks prior to the plot's abortive execution, assisted the authorities in tracking down those implicated. A reformed catholic, Jonson was no doubt under some duress to assist in this manner, and it is fascinating to learn that he himself had experienced an earlier run-in with Chief Justice Popham when in 1601 an anonymous informer had accused him of writing libellous material into his play *Poetaster*. The lawyer Richard Martin saved

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<sup>25</sup> See in particular Riggs. References are also to be found in Jonson's own play *Catiline*. See also B. N. DeLuna, *Jonson's Romish Plot: A Study of 'Catiline' and its Historical Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

Jonson from any legal proceedings on that particular occasion but it proves that the dramatist's dealings with Popham were both numerous and complex. Admittedly Eitherside's role is a relatively small one in the play's proceedings and his responses are on the whole equivocal or merely confused (as his nomenclature suggests), but perhaps there is therefore convenient opportunity for a covert swipe at the, by then, deceased Lord Chief Justice Popham?

What lends considerable support to critical speculation of this nature is that Jonson makes it clear that Eitherside is intimately involved in the financial venturing and corrupt projections of both Meercraft and Lady Tailbush. This then implicates him not only in the scandalous cosmetics trade and the ridiculous manufacture of toothpicks for the court, but also in schemes for the drainage of the Fens in East Anglia. Those schemes are outlined by Meercraft and through them he convinces Fitzdottrel that he might become the 'Duke of Drowned land'. Popham was himself engaged directly in some notorious fen drainage schemes. In 1605 he 'undertook' ( and that is a phrase which along with its cognates, 'undertaker' and 'undertake', resonates throughout the text of *The Devil is an Ass*) to drain the fenland at Upwell in Somerset. He put into motion similar schemes for Cambridgeshire - indeed the channel known as



‘Popham’s eau’ was abandoned at his death in 1607. Such observations carry us into the direct locality of Fitzdottrel’s dreaming in *The Devil is an Ass*. Indeed the Cambridgeshire plans and projections were in the process of being revived, amidst hopes of boosting seriously depleted crown coffers, in 1616 when the play was composed, stirring perhaps for Jonson memories of an old adversary, who was after all described in an anonymous letter to James VI and I as ‘covetous and bloodie’, since he had ruined the livelihoods of, and in many cases “dispossessed”, the fenland locals.

There is a danger of overstating the weight of significance carried by the specific fen drainage project in the play. What is clear is that in the early modern period fen drainage was a longterm focus of grievances.<sup>26</sup> Often seen as a contributing factor to pre-civil war tensions in the Caroline 1630s, fen drainage has far earlier historical roots. Back in 1589, Humphrey Bradley, despite his name a Netherlander, had presented a treatise to Elizabeth I’s chief minister proposing the reclamation of land from water, thus creating a whole new county in the area of the fens. The Queen declined interest, but in 1600, a few years prior to her

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<sup>26</sup> Happé’s edition is disappointingly one-sided in its reading of the fen drainage theme, saying that ‘Like so much of the play this is ambivalent, for draining the fens was useful, and it was ultimately achieved . . .’ (p. 7). As we shall see, both of these statements require considerable qualification.

death, she signed an Act of Parliament for 'the recovering of many hundred thousand acres of marshes'. The Stuart kings focused with renewed determination on these schemes with hopes of reviving an ailing and often near-bankrupt treasury. Although Sharpe is anxious to stress that their motives were not entirely profit-driven - it was hoped that new agricultural land would result, allowing far greater, and more efficient, crop-production in a period of soaring populations - in retrospect we tend to record the agricultural exhaustion of previously fertile soil, and the devastation of essential wetland habitats by farming monocultures.<sup>27</sup>

In the early seventeenth century the aim was undoubtedly to employ new engineering techniques, mostly deriving from the Low Countries, to the benefit of the average person.<sup>28</sup> In the 1610s through the 1650s republic there was a veritable flood of Dutch engineers into Britain; naturally enough social consequences were registered due to the habits of these Continental Puritans.

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<sup>27</sup> cf. Sharpe, *The Personal Rule*. There is also an important question as to whether Jonson would have had any awareness of ecology when framing his critique; the danger of imposing late twentieth-century concerns on his work is paramount. An interesting comparison might be Jonathan Bate's application of similar 'green' theorizing to the work of Wordsworth in *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Interesting then to record that in the 1990s the Netherlands themselves are in the process of reconvertng vast farmland sites into wetland habitats in order to preserve a number of rare species as well as the delicate balance of wetland and marsh ecosystems.

Meercraft uses them as an example of frugality when castigating Everill for his social excesses:

This comes of wearing  
 Scarlet, gold lace, and cut-works! Your fine gartering!  
 With your blown roses, cousin! And your eating  
 Pheasant, and godwit, here in London! Haunting  
 The Globes and Mermaids! wedging in with lords  
 Still at the table! and affecting lechery  
 In velvet! Where could you ha'contented yourself  
 With cheese, salt-butter, and a pickled herring,  
 I'the Low Countries? There worn cloth, and fustian!  
(III.iii.22-30)

Some of Jonson's own "Catholic" lifestyle is suggested here in Everill's pursuits, but the suspicion of the Dutch "invaders" should also be registered.

In a fascinating book on water engineering, its history, and its continuing responsibility to the community, Jeremy Purseglove observes:

For the flood to yield up its riches, two things were required; a competent engineer and plenty of capital. To obtain the latter, there emerged a peculiarly modern group of business men who called themselves 'undertakers' or adventurers. An undertaker was one who contracted to 'undertake' a drainage scheme: an 'adventurer' was one who 'adventured' his capital on such an undertaking. The security of both was the premise of a large proportion of the land after the drainage operation had been successfully completed.<sup>29</sup>

This is Meercraft's discourse - 'He shall but be an undertaker with me' (II.i.36) - however he may choose to adorn its surface with "natural" metaphors:

Sir, it shall be no shame to me to confess,  
 To you that we poor gentlemen that want acres,  
 Must for our needs turn fools up, and plough ladies

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Purseglove, *Taming the Flood: A History and Natural History of Rivers and Wetlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 47.

Sometimes to try what glebe they are: and this  
Is no unfruitful piece.

(III.iv.44-48)

I have considered you  
As a fit stock to graft honours upon.  
I have a project to make you a duke, now.  
That you must be one, within so many months  
As I set down out of true reason of state,  
You sha' not avoid it.

(II.i.24-29)

In the latter example, even Meercraft's horticultural metaphor has an artificial, contrived aspect since he employs the idea of grafting a scion onto a rootstock in order to create a certain variety of fruit; the metaphor was employed throughout the Shakespearean sonnet sequence, but here refers specifically to the rather unnatural world of the honours system. It implicitly constitutes a criticism of James VI and I's notorious policy of the creation and sale of titles.

Amidst all his Aristophanic cloud-cuckoo land projections, Meercraft's real aim is to secure other people's money and investments:

He shall not draw  
A string of's purse. I'll drive his patent for him.  
We'll take in citizens, commoners, and aldermen,  
To bear the charge, and blow 'em off again  
Like so many dead flies, when 'tis carried.  
The thing is for recovery of drowned land,  
Whereof the Crown's to have his moiety  
If it be owner: else, the Crown and owners  
To share that moiety, and the recoverers  
To enjoy the tother moiety for their charge.

(II.i.40-49)

His first entry onstage is wonderfully emphatic, bustling, and assertive, and his personification of money prefigures the

character of Pecunia in *The Staple of News*, as well as providing an analogue with that play's concern with the granting of monopolies by the crown:

Sir, money's a whore, a bawd, a drudge,  
Fit to run out on errands: let her go.  
*Via pecunia!* When she's run and gone,  
And fled and dead, then will I fetch her again  
With *aquae-vitae*, out of an old hogshead!  
(II.i.1-5)

Encouraging Gilthead to make Plutarchus a captain in the London militia, Meercraft acknowledges the prevalence of the military metaphor in literary accounts of sexual encounters when he tells him to collect toy soldiers:

Get him the posture book, and's leaden men  
To set upon a table, 'gainst his mistress  
Chance to come by, that he may draw her in  
And show her Finsbury battles.  
(III.ii.38-41)

His strongly-stressed monosyllabic thrusts at II.i. are suggestive of a sexual attack on money (another idea that will undergo further exploration in *The Staple of News*):

While there are lees of wine, or dregs of beer,  
I'll never want her! Coin her out of cobwebs,  
Dust, but I'll have her! Raise wool upon eggshells,  
Sir, and make grass grow out o' marrow-bones,  
To make her come.  
(II.i.6-10)

Coining out of cobwebs and dust recalls the alchemical schemes of Subtle and Face in Jonson's 1610 play; Meercraft is indeed a conjuror of finances, engaged in the performance that is money and investment. His very career entails the suspension of disbelief on the part of adventurers involved in his fiscal

negotiations. Adventuring is necessarily a joint enterprise but one in which Meercraft seeks to have absolute control. The connections with other performative rituals, be they religion, exorcism, or the theatre, are not so far-fetched.

Meercraft must make Fitzdotterel believe that he can tame the flood, although he has said that no man is a state of perpetuity in the natural world. Initially however he claims to have a far better-researched project than fellow undertakers:

Yes, which will arise  
To eighteen millions, seven the first year:  
I have computed all and made my survey  
Unto an acre. I'll begin at the pan,  
Not at the skirts as some ha' done, and lost  
All that they wrought, their timber-work, their trench,  
Their banks all borne away, or else filled up  
By the next winter. Tut, they never went  
The way: I'll have it all.

(II.i.50-58)

Meercraft intends to avoid land slippage or shrinkage by commencing centrally and not at the margins (indicative perhaps of his philosophy on life). In truth, many of the complex schemata advanced in the early seventeenth century for the purposes of drainage were, literally, swept away, reclaimed by the ever-encroaching waters. Fitzdotterel will also lose the other land he has claimed, that belonging to his wife, Frances; the land was secured over to him as part of her dowry, but Wittipol and Manly have won her back its economic management, albeit by underhand means: 'My land is drowned indeed -.' (V.viii.159).

Critics frequently point out that Fitzdottrel's gullible nature is signalled by his name: a dotterel is a type of plover, a bird which is by all accounts easily caught (the bird-names of Volpone's clients are similarly suggestive of their predatory instincts). A dotterel is also a wader-bird, particular to the East Anglian wetlands, especially so in Jonson's time.<sup>30</sup> Whilst the London setting for *The Devil is an Ass* is crucial for reasons already stated, the East Anglian sphere of reference is often reduced to a critical footnote, yet, like Meercraft's drainage schemes, Jonson has placed this at the pan of his play and not the skirts.

The dispossession of the local villagers that was the consequence of schemes such as Meercraft's is not really the theme of Jonson's play although, as we have seen elsewhere, he was interested in the operations of the local community. Nor is

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<sup>30</sup> The same bird's movements, wading across the marshes, are mimetically represented by the invading strangers, the adventurers, of Andrew Motion's 'Inland', in *The Pleasure Steamers* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978), a poem explicitly about the drainage of the Cambridgeshire fens in 1618, the plans for which were being advanced at the time of Jonson's play. In Wicken Fen, near Ely in Cambs., one of the few remaining protected wetland sites in Great Britain and the National Trust's first acquisition, there is still a section known as 'Adventurers Fen':

Their boat put down  
some men: one staked

its prow into our land  
waded towards us  
over the grass, and  
lifted one arm. Our world  
dried on his hand.

('Inland', Part Two: Winter 1618-Spring 1619,  
'Disembarkation')

*The Devil is an Ass* a play that directly accuses the Crown of absolutist or dictatorial policies in the fens but such issues clearly perturb the dramatist, not least because of the grants to favourites that were involved. Riggs has written that:

In the final analysis, the playwright acknowledges that the world of Jonsonian comedy, like the urban society it mirrors, is irremediably corrupt. Only the King could restore order to it. Just as James had successfully intervened in the Leicestershire witchcraft trials, he (and he alone) has the power to introduce lasting reforms into Jacobean London.<sup>31</sup>

*The Devil is an Ass* provided much of the basis for L.C. Knight's at the time innovative reading of Jonson as a critic of early capitalism.<sup>32</sup> Riggs, like Barton, argues for an essentially nostalgic and conservative Jonson in this play who sees the monarch's intervention as a solution to the social disturbance represented by figures such as Meercraft who is, as his name suggests, mere craft - a dangerous juncture of greed, conscience-free ambition, fraud, and overweening energies, with little personality to balance this out. Yet Meercraft, as I have already stated, is essentially a failure, certainly by the play's epilogue; during the course of events he exerts a relatively small degree of control, far less than say Mosca or Face. Those with whose practices we eventually sympathize, Wittipol, Manly, and Frances, are shown first in the

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<sup>31</sup> Riggs, p. 244.

<sup>32</sup> cf. L.C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin in assoc. with Chatto and Windus, 1962), and Don E. Wayne's reassessment 'Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View'.



play, and thus to Pug seem the most shocking examples of London's ability to out-devil hell. This suggests something other than some nostalgic, pre-modern, and communal social vision on the part of the dramatist. *The Devil is an Ass* does not constitute a specific defence of some 'imagined community' but rather a defence of the stage as a republic. Play-acting need not constitute a moral negative in Jonson - think for example of *Brainworm* or *Prudence*; Wittipol's disguise in this play is seen to bring about a socially positive conclusion. Such negative forces as Meercraft can be contained by the republican operations of the play-community. This was a theme to which Jonson would return in his final, unfinished work *The Sad Shepherd* where Robin Hood's society operates to similar effect against Maudlin's enchantments.<sup>33</sup>

Riggs goes on to question whether James would ever exercise his supposed power to control and contain:

Meercraft's chief project . . . raised the issue of James's responsibility in a very direct way. Although the King had officially repudiated the practice of granting Monopolies, he had recently awarded the right to reclaim the Fens to Sir Robert Carr, a Scot . . . who had danced in *The Golden Age Restored*. Thanks to James's openhandedness, Meercraft's confidence game was Carr's legitimate business venture.<sup>34</sup>

Fitzdottrel's character has been linked to Sir Robert Carr who was himself familially linked to the Earl of Somerset (also Robert Carr),

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<sup>33</sup> In *Politics of Mirth*, Marcus suggests Maudlin represents an anti-communal spirit in the play.

<sup>34</sup> Riggs, p. 244.

who was by 1616 in disgrace and imprisoned in the Tower of London, accused of involvement, with his wife, Lady Frances Howard, in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Overbury had been Jonson's friend and the dramatist later told Drummond that he had been accused over the text of *The Devil is an Ass* and that the King had asked him to 'conceal' the satire on the 'Duke of Drowned Land'.<sup>35</sup> Possibly the registered allusion to Sir Robert Carr, and by implication to his troubled namesake, touched James too close to the political and personal bone.

In 1616 the monarch was still promising to restore to Somerset lands and rights confiscated upon his arrest; he had even granted him special permission to wear the garter of a Knight of the Realm whilst in prison.<sup>36</sup> Jonson's own dealings with Somerset (Carr) were typically convoluted - Frances Howard's first wedding to the Earl of Essex had occasioned the controversial and now embarrassing masque *Hymenaei*. Jonson had also written two entertainments for her second marriage to Somerset (then still Carr; he was created an Earl to ensure his new wife did not lose status) in 1613 - *A Challenge at A Tilt*, *The Irish Masque* - but by 1616 when all three were included in the published

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<sup>35</sup> See *Conversations*, p. 604, (ll.350-55).

<sup>36</sup> See A.R. Braunmuller, 'Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, as Collector and Patron', in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. by Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 230-50.

Workes he had meticulously extracted any direct reference to either occasion.<sup>37</sup> More covert references to the whole affair may be embedded in *The Devil is an Ass*, where we see an impotent marriage (the cause of the Essex annulment, a case sanctioned by James himself), various conspiracies and imprisonments, and even accusations of female devilry (bandied around in the scandalous Overbury trial - a famous contemporary ballad satirized Lady Frances - and note the name - as a witch).<sup>38</sup> Overt reference comes at I.ii. when Fitzdottrel attempts in vain, Faustus-like, to conjure the devil:

Ay, they do now name Brentnor, as before  
 They talked of Gresham, and of Doctor Forman,  
 Franklin, and Fiske, and Savory - he was in too -  
 But there's not one of these that ever could  
 Yet show a man the Devil in true sort.  
 (I.ii.1-5)

Fitzdottrel names Brentnor, a maker of almanacs, as an even more recent example of devilry than the various participants in the Overbury trial - Gresham, also an almanac-maker; Simon Forman, an astrologer and quack doctor; James Franklin, the to-be executed apothecary who supplied the poison; Nicholas Fiske, a physician; and Abraham Savory, an actor named by Mrs Turner

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<sup>37</sup> See Lindley, 'Embarrassing Ben'.

<sup>38</sup> See Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*. Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, sees *The Devil is an Ass* as intricately connected to the highly topical Overbury scandal.

(who was also to be executed) during cross-examination as a sorcerer.

Allusions to Howard and Somerset (Carr) in this play-text, as well as Sir Robert Carr's monopoly to drain the fens, cannot have gone unperceived, certainly not by the King himself. Fitzdotterel is not Sir Robert Carr, no more than he is the Earl of Essex (nor is Morose a direct allegory of Essex in *Epicoene*, despite related themes there), nor is Meercraft some direct equation of Sir Robert Carr but the allusion to his involvement in lucrative land drainage, like that of Justice Popham, opens up a whole area of speculation, as much for twentieth-century as for original audiences.

Jonson had a prescient awareness of the polemic surrounding fen drainage schemes and not just in terms of Nature's eventual reclamation of this self-fashioned land. In the late 1620s, Charles I would employ Cornelius Vermuyden, a Dutchman, on further projects of this kind, even knighting him at Whitehall in 1629 - the price of which appears to have been to undertake further costly projects. Many villagers began to protest against the dispossession such land policies invariably entailed. Pitched battles ensued. Outsiders were felt to be overturning a perfectly satisfactory agricultural economy, where land was farmed in common and the marshes themselves provided an adequate living for many sedge-cutters, thatchers, and other

craftspeople. Many wetlands were co-operatively managed, thus preserving delicate ecological balances, although it would be naive to present these communities as 'some kind of pastoral socialist Utopia'.<sup>39</sup> Any balance and communality however was effectively destroyed by the disembarking adventurers.

It is surely not too much of a projection backwards to record here that in 1638 in Ely the commoners found a veritable champion in their fight against fen drainage, in the shape of a local farmer called Oliver Cromwell. They appointed him their advocate at the Commission of Sewers in Huntingdon and he ensured that a clause concerning the commandeering of common land was included in the catalogue of complaints that became known as the Grand Remonstrance and which was presented to the King in 1641; by then Cromwell was a member of parliament. This is not an attempt to present him as some permanent champion of the commons: in 1649 he would co-sponsor an Act for the Draining of the Great Level. Possibly he simply sought compensation for the Ely commoners or he had by the 1640s himself become a victim of absolutist designs. Whatever the reason he contracted the King's own engineer, Vermuyden, for the work.

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<sup>39</sup> Purseglove, *Taming the Flood*, p. 32.

The important point to extrapolate from all of this is that fen drainage was to represent a contentious political issue up to and throughout the civil wars; once again Jonson is registering the tensions of his age. In Richard Brome's *The Court Beggar* (1639-40), Sir Andrew Mendicant, along with three other projectors, enters onstage in the antimasque that virtually ends the play, 'attir'd all in Patents and with a windmill on his head . . . .' In 1643, another son of Ben, Thomas Randolph, would feature in his play *The Muse's Looking Glass* a debate between an engineer named Banausus and a gentleman called Colax:

BANAUSUS	I have a rare device to set Dutch windmills Upon New-market Heath, and Salisbury Plaine, To draine the Fens.
COLAX	The Fens Sir are not there.
BANAUSUS	But who knowes but they may be? <sup>40</sup>

The East Anglian landscape of windmills and wetlands is here imaginatively transported to a London location. Ben Jonson had achieved exactly this nearly thirty years earlier in a play that is by no means backward-looking, but almost confrontational in its considerations of the present and the future.

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Purseglove, *Taming of the Flood*, p. 56.

CHAPTER TEN: "A WHOLE REALME, A COMMONWEALTH OF  
PAPER": PRESS, CENSORSHIP, AND *THE STAPLE OF NEWS*

The tangible effects of an advancing print culture on the availability of news can and has been dated to the 1620s. That decade witnessed the circulation of *corantos*, news-sheets deriving from Continent and relating the progress of the European wars; it also saw the transition towards domestically printed newsbooks. Such happenings have conversely been seen as liberating and potentially democratizing in their provision of news for a wider audience<sup>1</sup> or in their Protestant bias as an example of the susceptibility of news to such contentious issues as "censorship" and "propaganda".

These terms require newer and more thoughtful definitions in their application to the early modern period. Both are anachronistic invocations, linguistic projections back from later

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<sup>1</sup> cf. David Norbrook, 'Areopagitica, Censorship, and the Early Modern Public Sphere', forthcoming in *The Administration of Aesthetics: Censorship, Political Criticism, and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Richard Burt and John Archer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press):

There was a significant expanse in the political public sphere, especially from the 1620s onwards, an emergent civil society whose means of communication - reports of parliamentary debates, newsletters, satires and so on - circulated horizontally, cutting across the vertical power structures emanating from the court.

(pp. 7-8)

My thanks to David Norbrook for allowing me to use a draft copy of this paper prior to its publication.

times, and both are therefore prone to inaccuracies.<sup>2</sup> Censorship was frequently the result of arbitrary whims or decisions, or of the political “moment”, rather than an established policy or regime. Propaganda in our modern understanding suggests a manipulative state operation: no comparable notion of ‘state’ existed in the early seventeenth century. The sense of print as a commodity open to the usual interpretations and fetishizations of commodification is the one I wish to invoke in this chapter.

Ben Jonson’s *The Staple of News* (1626) with its innovative theme of a news-office and its employees and speculators was an important play for the 1620s not because it was an exposé of monarchical manipulation of the print but because it brought into the public domain the question of exactly what news constituted for society at large. The very use of the term “news” in this play to refer to numerous forms of literary production complicates the general critical understanding of Jonson’s “elitist politics”, especially with regard to the operations of the stage. Jonas Barish has implied that Jonson established a literary hierarchy in which plays and theatrical ephemera were fairly low on the ladder of importance; he regards the publication of the 1616 Folio as the act

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<sup>2</sup> See Burt, *Licensed by Authority*.



of a literary exclusionist.<sup>3</sup> Yet “news” brings into play news-sheets, pamphlets, ballads, prose, poetry, plays, and puppetry: it potentially legitimizes them all. What is fascinating about *The Staple of News* is that it only delegitimizes a resistance to print. The title of the play actually allies Jonson’s generic range - from masques to public theatre plays, from commonplace books to grammars, from poetry to prose. The play is an interesting blend of the poetic and the prosaic in terms of its linguistic structures (the play proper is in verse, the Intermeans in prose) and it implicitly engages with the theme of its own intertextuality.

News itself, because printed but ephemeral, to a large extent occupies an intermediate position between manuscripts and books. Jonson’s play represents an intervention in the debate over print. The 1620s was a crucial decade for Jonson in careerist terms not least because it witnessed the transition from Jacobean patronage to the more complicated negotiations he was forced to undergo during the Caroline reign; yet another redefinition of his personal and his public politics became necessary. What emerges in its most paradoxical form in *The Staple of News* is Jonson’s ‘elitist republicanism’, or ‘republican

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<sup>3</sup> Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, has been employed in quasi-doctrinal fashion to label Jonson as anti-theatrical and elitist in his politics. This theory has been wrongfooted by the work of Tim Murray and Joseph Loewenstein and it is in the wake of such research that I am conducting my own re-examination of the play.

elitism' (and the two are subtly different). He does not satirize the press *per se* but rather explores the politics of certain responses to it and its commodification.<sup>4</sup> In this way republicanism turns out to be not opposed to censorship but to depend upon new forms and new understandings of the term.<sup>5</sup> Jonson seeks to expand the range of discourses through the medium of "news" and to regulate them critically.

#### I: Background histories: Textual and contextual

The triumphant triple repetition of 'News, news, news!'<sup>6</sup> that ushers the Heralds onto the court-stage before King James VI and I in Jonson's 1620 masque, *News from the New World Discovered in the Moon*, conjointly announces an interest in and a concern with the emergent medium of print that would continue

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<sup>4</sup> Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*, observes:

Print did not replace the theater as the central legitimizing medium in early modern England. It expanded the influence of writing. . . The increase in popular literacy worked against monolithic, centralized authority, against the idea that there was one legitimate voice in the text.' (p. 49).

<sup>5</sup> As I will later argue, this is also true of weighted terms such as "community" in the Jonsonian text, see Chapter Twelve.

<sup>6</sup> *News From the New World Discovered in the Moon*, l.1. All quotations from the masque are from *The Complete Masques*, ed. by Stephen Orgel (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969; repr. 1975), henceforth *News from the New World*.

throughout the decade of the 1620s, outlast the reigning monarch, and endure well beyond Jonson's own demise in 1637.

Additionally present onstage with the Heralds are the diverse literary figures of a Printer, a Factor, and a Chronicler: all producers of this "news" in some respect, but all possessing startlingly different, indeed completely antithetical, understandings of their art/trade (that oblique signalling some of the inherent paradoxes of the print medium). The Heralds are astounded that the Printer enquires as to the cost-price of their news; such nascent capitalism seems anathema to them. The Printer on the other hand appears to harbour no such qualms:

Indeed I am all for sale, gentlemen, you say true. I am a printer, and a printer of news, and I do hearken after 'em wherever they be, at any rates; I'll give anything for a good copy now, be't true or false, so't be news.

(*News from the New World*, ll.14-17)

The element of snobbery and hierarchism in the Heralds' dismissal of the Printer as a 'dull tradesman' does not escape attention; the Factor (a newspaper columnist) is quick to express the egalitarian qualities of print: 'I have friends of all ranks and of all religions' (*News from the New World*, l.36). For these 'friends' (a word dangerously interchangeable with the more impersonal 'clients', and the accordingly less friendly relationship of clientage that Jonson explored in such plays as *Volpone* and

*Sejanus*), the Factor maintains an ‘answering catalogue’, and he has ambitious plans to expand his enterprise:

And I have hope to erect a staple for news ere long, whither all shall be brought and thence again vented under the name of staple-news, and not trusted to your printed conundrums of the serpent in Sussex, or the witches bidding the devil to dinner at Derby - news that, when a man sends them down to the shires where they are said to be done, were never there to be found.

(*News from the New World*, 11.41-47)

Jonson would erect a staple of news for himself before long; in the 1626 play of that title he would enlarge upon his consternation about the growing power and influence of the press and the printed media that is present in the Factor’s statements in *News from the New World*. Pamphlets and broadsheets had long been in existence and were accessible to the literate sector of the populace, but the 1620s, on the very cusp of which the above-quoted masque stands, was a decade that witnessed the arrival of regular newsbook journalism.

The significant cultural shift from the copyist’s workshop to that of the printer has been well documented:

One of the milestones of the Renaissance/early modern age, however we define it, was the invention of printing and a massive, if gradual, shift in the way ideas were being presented and disseminated as the technology became widespread.<sup>7</sup>

In 1620 *corantos* (single sheets of news in folio size) began to appear in London with some regularity, deriving from and

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus, ‘Renaissance/Early modern Studies’, p. 50. The work of Elizabeth Eisenstein is seminal here. See for example *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

reporting upon events occurring on the Continent, in particular the Thirty Years War. Many news-sheets that were circulating in England originated from the Dutch republic.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly the single-sheet corantos yielded their market dominance to the weightier quarto newsbooks that were often between sixteen and twenty-four pages in size. In truth, much of the content of the latter was news of the same war that had simply been extracted from the Dutch news-sheets and reshaped. Certainly the prevailing Star Chamber ban on the reporting of domestic news encouraged this literary dependency, but it also effects a startling comparison with contemporary views of literature as mere plagiarism<sup>9</sup> or refashioning.

Writing was clearly metamorphosing, both economically and politically, into a new commodity, a fact acknowledged in the capitalistic tones of the Printer in *News from the New World*. The colonialist implications of the masque's title should not be underestimated, even though the New World it speaks of is not that of the Americas but of the moon.

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<sup>8</sup> See the introductory essay to Anthony Parr's Revels edition of *The Staple of News* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). This is the edition used for the purposes of quotation throughout, henceforth Parr.

<sup>9</sup> Jonson himself introduced this term into the English language, adapting it from Martial's term for a kidnapper.

Yet the printing trade in its earliest days possessed vast and untrammelled potential. A 'responsible' form of journalism might after all establish a close, if not liberating, communication with "ordinary people" (the inverted commas signal my awareness of the socio-political difficulties involved in defining that particular target population).<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Eisenstein has demonstrated how the print culture rendered ideas far more widely accessible, discussing the potential democratization represented by the preservative powers of the print: 'it secured precious documents not by putting them under lock and key, but by removing them from chests and vaults and duplicating them for all to see . . . .'<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein's description unwittingly evokes the stage destiny in *The Staple of News* of Pecunia. She is lifted out of virtual captivity in the household of Pennyboy Senior (the names of her ladies-in-waiting - Statute, Band, and Mortgage - stressing the financial and emotional constraints involved) and into the space and sphere of possibility that constitutes the Staple news-office.

Democratic arguments of this nature are generally countered by modern critics with the suggestion that censorship enacted its own restraints upon the press; that royal control was exerted over

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<sup>10</sup> The issue is expertly weighed in Natalie Zemon Davis's essay, 'The Print and the People', in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (London: Duckworth, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein, p. 80.

this form, rendering it less than populist, if not quasi-absolutist, in content. Such readings are however generally more indicative of our own era in which there exists a sense of the news as being manipulated by a minority in control, be it due to financial (witness the Murdoch/Maxwell phenomenon) or political power (government limitations on war reporting). D.F. McKenzie states that the popular press in the early modern period was a reflection of an egalitarian movement, as well as immensely educative in forming a new language for talking about politics,<sup>12</sup> at a time when, as Anthony Parr puts it, 'people were ready to learn the language of that debate.'<sup>13</sup> Blair Worden has written an important essay that reassesses the contribution of censorship in this period to the freedom or otherwise of speech in print.<sup>14</sup> He declares that 'the problem of censorship is vulnerable to distortion'<sup>15</sup> and questions whether the freedom of the press was a debated issue

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<sup>12</sup> See McKenzie, 'The Staple of News', although he registers considerable doubt as to Jonson's participation in any such movement.

<sup>13</sup> Parr, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> See Worden, 'Literature and Political Censorship'. For examples of texts which present the monolithic understandings of censorship which Worden attacks see Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) and Clare, *Art Made Tongue-Tied by Authority*. For an argument related to Worden's, see S.L. Lambert, 'The Printers and the Government, 1604-1640', in *Aspects of Printing from 1600*, ed. by Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1987), pp. 1-29.

<sup>15</sup> Worden, 'Literature and Political Censorship', p. 45.

in the period, whilst also conceding that Jonson is an interesting case for any consideration of the effects of censorship.<sup>16</sup>

Undoubtedly the Crown frequently intervened in the print industry tending to grant patents, for certain classes of publication, to the monarch's favourites. English printing patents were broad grants and often proved extremely lucrative. The print medium itself existed uneasily between the worlds of royal licence and oscillating market forces; this forms part of the antimasque debate in *News from the New World* and also constitutes a central topos of *The Staple of News*.

Like many other seventeenth-century authors, Jonson recognized the new opportunities proffered by the printed book, not least its capacity to reach far wider audiences than manuscripts: its capacity to perform that function of being, to employ Natalie Zemon Davis's term, 'a carrier of social relationships'. Combined material and artistic success was

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Burt has made a valuable contribution to the currently raging censorship debate, creating a new model that involves not removal and replacement by the censoring body but rather dispersal and displacement. He argues that censorship was a far more collaboratory and complicit series of actions than monolithic notions of 'Censorship' allow. Just as no Ur-text can be uncovered in terms of authorial intention, neither does there exist some Ur-pre-censorship text; he argues that the text will always prove castrated, feminized, and therefore disappointing to those who seek such an artefact. Those who seek some original, radical politics are also likely to be disappointed: see Burt, *Licensed by Authority* and '(Un)Censoring in Detail': I am grateful to Richard Burt for making an advance copy of this article available to me, and for reading and offering comments upon an earlier draft of this chapter.



Jonson's objective, as his sharply-registered disappointment(s) at the poor reception(s) of his plays indicates. Yet, in acknowledging, and possibly even catering for, the new "popular" potential of his work, he continued to make ostensibly elitist and exclusive gestures through the medium of those books, displaying the "neurotic" personality he has been accused of, if not necessarily the pre-established elitism Stanley Fish has credited him with.<sup>17</sup> D.F. McKenzie regards *The Staple of News* as 'the hardening point of Jonson's isolation,'<sup>18</sup> partly because the dramatist may be pushing for the political awakening of the '*menu peuple*' but makes no allowance for the struggle and the difficulty this would entail. In his very gesture of accommodation towards the general public, Jonson abstracts himself from the situation in hand:

Jonson evidences the same virtues and limitations of all whose passionate defence of minority culture is beyond criticism so long as it remains in a condition of high-minded self-abstraction from mass civilization.<sup>19</sup>

Contradictory drives of this nature characterize the writing profession and the volumes it produced in the seventeenth century: 'There was a tension, often quite explicit in these

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<sup>17</sup> See Fish, 'Authors-Readers', where he argues, admittedly in the context of Jonson's poetry, that the author played the game of excluding members of an already defined elitist readership, this denying any potential 'populism' in the Jonsonian text, although he concedes that the plays are a separate issue.

<sup>18</sup> McKenzie, '*The Staple of News*', p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

volumes between the intellectual elitism claimed for authorship, and the broader appeal required if authorship were to prosper in the marketplace.’<sup>20</sup> Frontispieces in particular simultaneously represented inclusive and exclusive gestures. For example, the frontispiece to Jonson’s 1616 *Workes* cites Horace in Latin; Latin was a language available only to the discriminating and well-educated few.<sup>21</sup> Yet the time-consuming and meticulous preparation of his copy-texts for print would appear to imply that Jonson fostered hopes of attracting a wider readership than the limited Latinized sector of the literate population. The careful creation and fashioning of the Folio certainly constituted a play for respectability on Jonson’s behalf within the early modern republic of letters.

The notion of print as a fixing agent, preserving texts and regulating spellings and layout has been explored by Eisenstein and others. In an article on the early modern printer John Wolfe (whose own foreign newsbooks purported to be little more than officially-sanctioned propaganda), Joseph Loewenstein has stressed that the age of print witnessed a regulation of English writing: uniform orthography and appearance became pressing

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<sup>20</sup> Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Healy, *New Latitudes*.

concerns.<sup>22</sup> But print is not necessarily a stable medium -

Jonson's revisions and amendments to previous quarto copytexts and his suppression of details no longer relevant or now simply embarrassing, are indicators of the instabilities of texts, printed or otherwise.<sup>23</sup>

Print can also be a destabilizing medium - a medium that can mobilize, change, or protest; it can prove to be a liberating force within society at large. Jonson's marginalia and annotations may conversely suggest acts of containment by a paranoid author but the fact that these emendations themselves shifted and altered suggests a wholly more complex situation. In *The Staple of News* Pecunia does not represent a single text - she exists in numerous versions. Men reinterpret and differentiate Pecunia in order to assert some personal claim over her. This can be viewed as a parallel to what Richard Burt has designated 'censorship as "fetishism"'.<sup>24</sup> He has demonstrated the way in which 'Texts circulate as desirable/exchangeable/receivable commodities insofar as they are differentiated from other versions in the same

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Loewenstein, 'For a History of Literary Property: John Wolfe's Reformation', *ELR*, 18 (1988), 389-412.

<sup>23</sup> See Ayres, 'The Iconography of Jonson's *Sejanus*', and Lindley, 'Embarrassing Ben'.

<sup>24</sup> See Burt, '(Un)Censoring in Detail'.

or different media . . . .’<sup>25</sup> Each character seeks to liberate Pecunia from one defining reading only to impose on her another version; she is never allowed full entrance into the social field as an uncensored whole. Instead each character produces a partial and censored reading which is both dependent upon, and a departure from, that of her previous interpreter.

The early-seventeenth-century act of literary creation was therefore characterized by several factors; one area of impact was the heightened sense of tension between attempts to “democratize” the art, opening it up to ever wider audiences and attaining to new readerships, and the increased demands for the safeguarding of intellectual property rights. The latter objective necessarily raises questions for the critic of this period of exclusivity and elitism, of tyranny amidst the new republican spirit of print. Such tensions were embedded in the fact that it was not until 1643 that Copyright Law was introduced in England (although it should be added that at that time it was not strictly equivalent to our own legal understandings of the term); the Civil War was then in its early stages and England was moving, albeit unwittingly, towards republican government.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> The “inclusive” nature of Cromwell’s protectorate has been questioned by a number of historians. See for example Barry Coward, *Cromwell* (London and New York: Longmans, 1991). Cromwell’s coercive attempts to

If the expanding print industry drew attention to the problematized and potentially conflictual area of “rights” in the realms of politics and literature, it also began to substantially alter author-reader relationships from their pre-existent states, creating, not least, a forum for debate both political and theatrical:

Broadside ballads had long been a profitable way of exploiting public curiosity about current sensations, but the growth of literacy and awareness of the world at large, especially as England became more involved in Continental politics, created the conditions for a new kind of journalism, one that might demand a more sustained effort from the reader and mediate responsibility between news and its recipients.<sup>27</sup>

Jonson was both struggling to cope with these redefinitions and striving to harness them for his own benefit; possibly this lies behind his efforts to contain (constrain?) and control the more wayward performative energies of his texts in his careful oversight of their journey into print.

As many critics have remarked, Jonson was engaged with the potential of print in both its advantageous and disadvantageous sense. *The Staple of News* is an effort to explore the problems of the medium in literary, political, and sociological terms. The play also highlights the tensions at large, locally,

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muffle the Levellers, the Diggers, and other more democratic parliamentary groups are an indication of the narrower notions of social liberty Cromwell himself entertained. He carved out for himself the quasi-absolutist position of Lord Protector and his renunciation of the army’s offer of the crown stirs theatrical memories of the staged renunciations of Julius Caesar and Richard III in Shakespeare’s eponymous plays.

<sup>27</sup> Parr, p. 24.

nationally, and on a European scale. In England political and religious spectators were witnessing a period of massive transition and the precarious nature of this situation was exacerbated in 1626 by the accession of a new monarch. This is not to claim that the tensions of the play in any direct way presage or prefigure the complexities of the 1640s conflict or the eventual deposition of the king, but, as previously suggested, the doubts accompanying the new reign are surely embedded in the contemporaneous text of *The Staple of News*. Charles I was the 'new news at court' and Jonson was acutely aware of a shift in his own relations with the Crown.<sup>28</sup> In 1626 it seemed unlikely that Jonson would enjoy the sort of favour he had previously received from James and so the authorial relationship was being redefined in another important sense.

In 1624 Jonson had conveniently reshaped the political disaster that constituted Prince Charles's and the Duke of Buckingham's trip to Madrid in pursuit of the hand of the Spanish Infanta in marriage; this abortive effort was now entirely reformed into a celebration of Charles's safe homecoming in the

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, 'We Are One Man's All', suggests that one of the motives behind Jonson's composition of the 1621 masque *The Gipsies Metamorphosed* may have been to seek the support and patronage of Charles I and his sidekick the Duke of Buckingham (who commissioned the piece) in the waning years of James. The course of events however and subsequent references in Jonson's plays do not seem to bear this out, or they at least imply that the bid was unsuccessful.

masque *Neptune's Triumph*.<sup>29</sup> Jonson was ostensibly employed as a court propagandist on this occasion with 'ephemeral work to do' in reclaiming popular support for Charles. The commission however still derived ultimately from James and it is therefore he who is celebrated in the text as Neptune, King of the Sea - the sea that carried his son safely home from the dangerous Continent.

The year 1624 as an historical moment has attracted much attention, not least because of the exceptionally co-operational parliament that was summoned in that year. Wooed by Charles and Buckingham to make war on Spain (a complete reversal of Buckingham's previous reputation as pro-Spanish and crypto-Catholic, a reputation compounded by the secret assignments to Madrid), a predominantly anti-Habsburg Parliament happily voted the subsidies necessary for the preparations for war to begin. This accord had virtually collapsed by the time of Charles's accession a year later and historians have naturally been anxious to examine the reasons why this might have been.

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<sup>29</sup> For an interesting discussion of this masque, see Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). She examines the way in which masques displaced the consumption of sweets and confectionery following a banquet - 'consuming the void' as it was known - and how the idea of that ritual - a withdrawal into privacy - was replaced by an act of exposure, the masque. The banqueting halls for the purpose accordingly grew in size. Fumerton discusses the masque and its "trivial" themes in terms not of the Spanish match but an aristocratic "aestheticization" of foreign trade.

Thomas Cogswell has recorded the deep national excitement at Charles's safe (and unmarried) return from Spain in 1623, suggesting that fears of Habsburg domination and Catholic invasion were quite genuine at this time.<sup>30</sup> The question begs asking why a propagandistic text such as *Neptune's Triumph*, seemingly so suited to 1623, took a further year to be commissioned at a Court not usually slow to capitalize on such opportunities.

The answer lies in James's self appointment as European peacemaker: he was still hopeful, even in 1623, of averting war with Spain and even of a Habsburg marriage alliance. The question of delay is not evaded by Jonson's masque-text; as ever, more complex in the reading than on its surface. The Poet of *Neptune's Triumph* has had to bide his time before treating the failed Spanish marriage negotiations in masque-form. This constitutes the operation of a form of royal censorship - restricting subject matter until a considered appropriate time - but the political efficacy of such an action is subtextually questioned by Jonson since balladeers and gossips have had their fill of the theme:

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<sup>30</sup> See Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621-1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and 'England and the Spanish Match', in Cust and Hughes, pp. 107-33.



It was not time  
 To mix this music with the vulgar's chime.  
 Stay, till th'abortive and extemporal din  
 Of balladry was understood a sin,  
 Minerva cried; that what tumultuous verse  
 Or prose could make or steal, they might rehearse,  
 And every songster had sung out his fit;  
 That all the country and the city wit  
 Of bells and bonfires and good cheer was spent,  
 And Neptune's guard had drunk all that they meant;  
 That all the tales and stories now were old  
 Of the sea-monster Archy, or grown cold;  
 The muses then might venture undeterred,  
 For they love then to sing when they are heard.<sup>31</sup>

Jonson exposes the futility and belatedness of the retrospective rewriting of events he is being employed to produce. Admittedly the negativistic treatment here of popular media such as ballads suggests an unduly aggressive attitude on Jonson's part towards the cultural exercises and flexings of society beyond the court, but it also possesses a sense of the cultural energy of such forms and the inertia of a court that waits so long to comment with a "celebratory" banquet that events have grown cold.<sup>32</sup> The vivacity of Nightingale's ballad-singing scene in *Bartholomew Fair* provides a dramatic counterpart to this speech and Jonson is after all bidding his own time with the heir to the throne at this stage,

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<sup>31</sup> *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*, ll.115-28. All quotations from this masque taken from Orgel, *The Complete Masques*, henceforth *Neptune's Triumph*.

<sup>32</sup> Alastair Bellany, ' "Rayling Rymes and Vaunting Verse": Libellous Politics in Early Stuart England, 1603-1628', in Sharpe and Lake, pp. 285-310, rightly suggests the need for greater literary-historical attention to be paid to the content of popular ballads. Cogswell, *Blessed Revolution*, makes a similar observation with particular reference to the Spanish match.

negotiating his own future. Hasty pronouncements on the Spanish affair could have proved disastrous.

By 1626 and *The Staple of News* Jonson is less reserved. A supposedly dead father authors his son via a written contract - that clutch of *mortmain* by which Dorothea Brooke feels so stifled in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* ; James VI and I, dead a single year, had written *Basillikon Doron* as a text to author his now dead son Prince Henry.<sup>33</sup> When Henry died, so did many of the hopes for the Stuart reign<sup>34</sup> and he may be therefore be regarded as an absent presence in this prodigal son play. Pennyboy Junior also woos his own "Spanish Infanta", the infinitely desirable Princess Aurelia Clara Pecunia (Golden Bright Money). Jonson no longer seems to be hedging his bets with the new monarch.

The female gossips of *The Staple of News* capture the sense of political disillusionment after the high hopes of 1624. It is Censure (her nomenclature implying political censorship?) who declares: 'Well, they talk we shall have no more Parliaments (God bless us) ' (*The Staple of News*, III. Intermean, 49-50),<sup>35</sup> referring

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<sup>33</sup> See Kevin Sharpe, 'The King's Writ: Royal Authors and Royal Authority in Early Modern England', in Sharpe and Lake, pp. 117-38.

<sup>34</sup> See Roy Strong, *Henry, Prince of Wales, and England's Lost Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> All subsequent play quotations in this chapter are from *The Staple of News* unless otherwise stated.

to Charles's dissolution of Parliament in 1625 after bitter dissent by M.P.s over his request for further subsidies towards the war. By now a number of military failures, and revived doubts about the sheer extent of Buckingham's power at court, had dampened parliamentary spirits.

In Act V Sc.i of *The Staple of News* Thomas announces: 'Our Staple is all to pieces, quite dissolved.' (V.i.39). The news-office in an extreme act of self-combustion (self-censorship?), has blown-up:

Shivered, as in an earthquake! Heard you not  
 The crack and ruins? We are all blown up!  
 Soon as they heard th'Infanta was got from them,  
 Whom they had so devoured i'their hopes  
 To be their patroness and sojourn with 'em,  
 Our emissaries, Register, Examiner  
 Flew into vapour; our grave governor  
 Into a subtler air, and is returned  
 (As we do hear) grand-captain of the jeerers.  
 I and my fellow melted into butter  
 And spoiled our ink, and so the Office vanished.  
 (V.i.40-50)

The mention of Pecunia as 'th'Infanta' again stirs memories of the Spanish match and the dissolution of parliament.

In truth, Thomas has not melted into butter; this is simply a metaphor for his loss of position and, as such, part of a general pattern of butter puns in the text which play on the name of a famous printer Nathaniel Butter (who was reportedly not amused). It also implicitly questions the assumed fixity of print, assumed even by the Staple's workforce:



A news-office that resists the new print culture is doomed to failure.<sup>39</sup> The employees' written contracts barely prove more durable; ink after all can run and dissolve. The description of the office explosion can then be viewed as another variation on the overblown, hyperbolic accounts (such as that of Spinola and his eggs (I.iv)) that have indeed been its staple diet and production; it is an exaggerated account of financial dissolution, a company going as we still say 'into liquidation' after failed attempts to woo investors.<sup>40</sup>

## II: Instant surfaces

A crucial paradox of print is that although it was the medium expected (certainly by Jonson) to bring new depths of consideration and greater durability to otherwise ephemeral manuscripts, it was itself highly dependent upon surface appearance, matters of immediacy, fashion, and the visual - all those ephemeral elements for which Jonson seemingly berates the

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<sup>39</sup> Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics*, in a section entitled 'Tearing Down the Masque: Towards an Aesthetics of Consumerism', suggests that the masque form underwent a process of self-combustion or deconstruction as the age of capitalism took hold.

<sup>40</sup> Commentaries on the play since *H & S* have made this point but have produced it as confirmation of Jonson's opposition to news-offices such as the *Staple* and the dissolution therefore as an act of wish-fulfillment. I take issue with this reading, cf. McKenzie, '*The Staple of News*'.

stage in *The Staple of News*. Surfaces are widely prevalent in the debates and dialogues of this play: questions of fashion and trends and ephemera proliferate, and thus the most pressing connection between the four gossips of the Intermeans and the onstage action becomes plain.

The gossips are, according to the Prologue, as much attracted by the costumes and hairstyles of the acting company as by the play or the performances; the surface aspects of the production draw their attention:

O, Curiosity! You come to see who wears the new suit today,  
 whose clothes are best penned (whatever the part be), which  
 actor has the best leg and foot, what king plays without cuffs  
 and his queen without gloves, who rides post in stockings and  
 dances in boots?

(Prologue, ll.40-44)

The phrase ‘whose clothes are best penned’ is another instance of how the discourse of writing and print pervaded that of fashion and performance.<sup>41</sup> The reference to the king and his queen would have carried a precise register for contemporary audiences since Queen Anne had notoriously performed without gloves, and blacked-up, for the *Masque of Blackness* which she commissioned from Jonson himself (see Chapter Four): *The Staple of News* is not afraid to write into its performance an often ambivalent account of the Jacobean court penchant for the masque-form. That

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<sup>41</sup> Fascinatingly one of the popular genres of books borne out of the increased output by printing presses in England was that of “fashion manuals”, books depicting the national costumes of other countries and detailing the trends and styles of its own.

mention in the Prologue's statement of '(whatever the part be)' is really the nub of the point: that the play and its subtle characterizations (or otherwise) count for little in the face of the surface glow and glare of theatrical fashions. The sense of the theatre as something transient and ephemeral in our realm of experiences is exacerbated by such emphases and this was a, now notorious, impulse behind Jonson's desire to preserve in print the transient texts of his own masques, themselves so dependent in the performance upon visual effects as the reference to Anne of Denmark's appearance indicates.

The opening section of *The Staple of News* draws much of its performative energy from themes of fashion and surface. Pennyboy Junior stands on the brink of manhood, at least in terms of society's surface demarcation of that point in a person's life when they achieve "adulthood". When the play proper commences, the clock is about to strike and beckon in his twenty-first birthday; his period of wardship is drawing to a close.<sup>42</sup> His first act as a man is one of expenditure - he 'writes man' by

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<sup>42</sup> Jonson was fascinated with this stage in life. Bartholomew Cokes is another example of a prodigal ward. Cokes has a moral tutor in Humphrey Wasp; Jonson, having himself been tutor to Sir Walter Raleigh's problematic son Wat during some well-documented adventures in Paris, was personally acquainted with the theme.

commissioning an entirely new wardrobe.<sup>43</sup> The tailor who eventually arrives bears the significant title of ‘Fashioner’; the *dramatis personae* describes him as ‘the tailor of the times’. He caters to the self-fashioning demands of Renaissance men and women as much as the news-staple itself will.

Pennyboy Junior’s world is one dominated by surfaces, indeed by the visual sense as a whole; it is also one where bills of payment are the dominant texts. The shoemaker has noticeably postponed his arrival until the boy’s coming of age for fear he claim youth as an excuse for not settling his debts. Professional relationships are dominated by suspicion because money pervades all thinking and all contracts.

The speed with which the discourses of print and fashion began to merge in this period was astonishing: if clothes sat well they were said to be ‘in print’. Print was encouraging the identification of spheres via their attendant jargons, that surface element of linguistics which dominates *The Staple of News*. This is a play much concerned with the varying ramifications of language, be it in print or conversation. Richard Levin has demonstrated the link between the Staple itself, the society of jeerers (many of whom also work as emissaries or reporters at the press), and the

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<sup>43</sup> The act closely resembles the behaviour of Asotus in *Cynthia’s Revels* whose relationship with Argurion (gold) prefigures that of Pecunia and Pennyboy Junior.



projected Canters' college of Act IV.<sup>44</sup> McKenzie observes an interesting link between emergent print culture and expanding academic institutions, comparing the projected Canters' College with the universities of the 1620s at which a large number of new lectureships were being created and in opposition to which both Charles I and Archbishop Laud would speak.<sup>45</sup>

The press, the planned College, and the jeerers are concerned with increasingly superficial and exaggerated forms of language. The emissaries may make a living from spurious news items but the jeerers exist merely to throw people's words, as their names suggest, jeeringly back at them.<sup>46</sup> Fittingly enough the redundant management of the Staple subsequently take over the jeerers: so averse to the construance of positive meanings are Cymbal and Fitton that they have attempted to prevent anything from making it into print, scorning the public for the trust they place in such a surface form.

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Levin, 'The Staple of News, the Society of Jeerers, and Canters' College', *PQ*, 44 (1965), 445-53. Richard Brome would also exhibit an interest in the language of canting in *A Jovial Crew* (1641).

<sup>45</sup> See McKenzie, 'The Staple of News'.

<sup>46</sup> Though this is rather different to the 'nonsense' competition of the game of vapours in *Bartholomew Fair* and the word-games of *Cynthia's Revels*, there is nevertheless an important link between all three forms of jargon or language and the way in which the diversity of languages function in the Jonsonian text. Language carries the potential of unifying but also of disunifying and Jonson appears fascinated by the factions of language that occur in any number of different and disparate communities.

The culinary trade has its specific discourse which continues to inspire printed matter. What is particularly remarkable about Lickfinger, Pennyboy Senior's cook in *The Staple of News*, is that his reading is far from confined to a specialized area such as recipe books. Unlike the fashion-slave and utterly superficial Pennyboy Junior, Lickfinger can truly claim to be a man of arts and arms (albeit that his weaponry is of the kitchen utensil variety); he is well read in a wide range of subjects, from military manuals to books recording Vitruvian architectural dimensions. He can appropriate the jargon (and the "news") of each domain to suit his own discursive purposes:

A master cook! Why, he's the man o'men  
 For a professor. He designs, he draws,  
 He paints, he carves, he builds, he fortifies,  
 Makes citadels of curious fowl and fish;  
 Some he dry-ditches, some moats round with broths, . . .  
 He is an architect, an engineer,  
 A soldier, a physician, a philosopher,  
 A general mathematician,  
 (IV.ii.19-23, 35-37)<sup>47</sup>

Undoubtedly comedic intentions are at large within this gross aestheticization of the fields of experience Lickfinger has used to inform his particular branch of art. The hyperbolic extravagance of language and metaphor demonstrates his own extravagant nature as well as that of his nutritional concoctions. But

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<sup>47</sup> This speech derives *verbatim* from the text of *Neptune's Triumph*, cf. ll.69-71. Its implicit comparison of the art of cookery and the art of war can be compared with that of Furnace the choleric cook in Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (c.1625), (I.ii.23-31).

Lickfinger serves up “news” along with dishes at his table; language is also consumed.

Surfaces can prove highly inviting, none apparently more so than the banquets prepared by Lickfinger, who with his own intertextuality proves to have a function well beyond the sphere of the kitchen. If conspicuous consumption provides the most accurate description of Pennyboy Junior’s prodigal lifestyle then the true creator of this consumer society is not one of the Staple’s numerous and numinous employees, but Lickfinger.<sup>48</sup> With his superbly suggestive and tactile nomenclature, his gluttony, and his exuberance, he provides the antithesis to his employer’s parsimony. If one is in Freudian terms an anal retentive - Almanac tells Pennyboy Senior, ‘Come, thou lov’st to be costive / Still i’t thy court’sy;’ (II.iv.26-27) - encasing Pecunia and hoarding his wealth, then Lickfinger, ‘that vessel of kitchen stuff!’ (II.ii.69), is truly the expulsive, or rather the site of expulsion, barely containing his own perspiration, excitement, or verbosity. It is he who tends to articulate the long set-piece monologues of the play and he who expounds at length on subjects galore. Admittedly Pennyboy Senior is also fond of the sound of his own voice, railing on the gut and groin that he feels determine society; as Cymbal reflects, ‘He has the monopoly of sole speaking,’ (III.iv.69) and

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<sup>48</sup> cf. McKenzie, ‘*The Staple of News*’.

perhaps he is right in that nobody marks what Pennyboy Senior is saying whereas Lickfinger's performative dialogue grabs attention. Where the others predominantly write or spend, he speaks. In many respects Lickfinger is the poet of this society; in dramatic terms his character possesses vast potential. With his rotundity and his showmanship Lickfinger is a quasi-Jonsonian figure (both are characterized in the play by their sweating), just as the Cook in *Neptune's Triumph*, from which Lickfinger was undoubtedly extrapolated and expanded, was there the poet-creator, the Maker.

The 1624 masque commences with a debate between a poet and the master-cook on the validity of either's trade. The Cook puns on their shared site of operation, 'Sir, this is my room and region too, the Banqueting House!' (*Neptune's Triumph*, l.13); both masques and huge feasts were enjoyed and 'staged' in the Banqueting House at Whitehall (in an ultimate act of fusion, Inigo Jones would design not just sets for masques there but the building itself). Descriptions of Lickfinger's meals are certainly proof that the food was staged as carefully on big occasions as any play.<sup>49</sup> The Poet bemoans the seasonal nature of his employment

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<sup>49</sup> Food frequently provided a masque theme for Jonson. See in particular *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, with Comus as God of the belly, the masque reappropriated in more strictly republican (and Protestant) terms by Milton in *Comus*, *A Masque presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634). See also Leah Marcus, 'The Occasion of Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*', *SEL*, 19 (1979), 271-94.

as writer of the Christmas masque: 'The most unprofitable of his servants, I, sir, the poet. A kind of a Christmas ingine, one that is used at least once a year for a trifling instrument of wit, or so.' (*Neptune's Triumph*, ll.19-21). Jonson's own disgruntlement at his under-use as court-poet may be registered here, but the Cook dismisses such self-piteous whimperings, 'Then you can be no good poet, for a good poet differs nothing at all from a master-cook. Either's art is the wisdom of the mind.' (*Neptune's Triumph*, ll.24-26). Much of this is an in-joke served up for the pleasure of the masque's (in the end hypothetical) Twelfth Night Court audience, no doubt about to enjoy or having enjoyed a sumptuous banquet. The Cook has pleased their palates and now the Poet hopes to achieve the same, although the near impossibility of satisfying expectations now faces him, 'That were a heavy and hard task, to satisfy Expectation, who is so severe an exactress of duties, ever a tyrannous mistress, and most times a pressing enemy.' (*Neptune's Triumph*, ll.33-35).

Lickfinger proffers almost identical arguments to Madrigal, the sub-poet of *The Staple of News*. His extravagant culinary creations can be perceived as an alimentary equivalent to the court masque, served up as it were for royal delectation; as Captain Shunfield so vividly describes:

Gi' him allowance,  
 And that but moderate, he will make a Siren  
 Sing i'the kettle, send in an Arion,  
 In a brave broth and of a wat'ry green  
 Just the sea colour, mounted on the back  
 Of a grown conger, but in such a posture  
 As all the world would take him for a dolphin.  
 (III.iii.34-40)<sup>50</sup>

The watery pageants that greeted Elizabeth I at Kenilworth Castle and other country estates during her summer progresses are recalled here;<sup>51</sup> the links with the royal shows, pageants, and processions are clear and this connection would have been intended for “public consumption” in the seventeenth century. In this central scene and in the play as a whole the masque genre is utilized (“commodified”?) in a public theatre context, allowing for the attendant redefinitions of space, purpose and target population - a democratization of an elitist form comparable to the workings of the press? As in Jonson’s generic alignments, the masque is made “news”.

Pennyboy Junior proves somewhat less adept at the production of personal meaning since his determination of events seems vastly dependent upon a need to impress others, even to imitate them, not least in the matter of dress. The extreme of this can be seen in his failure to check the bills he is presented with by the tailor and his cohorts; he simply trusts their judgements as

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<sup>50</sup> cf. *Neptune's Triumph*, ll.134-40.

<sup>51</sup> See Jean Wilson, *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1980).

he will later wholeheartedly trust Picklock's intentions (an intertextual reading of Jonson will render us aware that the picklocks of the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* are 'politic' ones and so is *The Staple of News* character). Pennyboy Canter castigates such carelessness about financial matters in an aside: 'I say 'tis nobly done to cherish shopkeepers / And pay their bills without examining, thus ' (I.iii.44-45), although ironically he too will be deceived by the surface charms of Picklock's persuasive legalistic discourse.

A disinterest in the harsh fiscal consequences of his behaviour is a mark of the conspicuous consumption of the prodigal son figure, but to proffer this as a sole reading of Pennyboy Junior is inadequate. He demonstrates occasional depth of understanding, not least of the central topos of the press.<sup>52</sup> Whilst he seems to pour money into the Staple with little regard, purchasing positions at will for his friends, he is also manifestly sympathetic towards the consuming public (perhaps because he empathizes with them as consumers), unlike the jeering Fitton who wishes to deny them their printed stories:

Why, methinks, sir, if the honest common people  
Will be abused, why should not they ha'their pleasure

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<sup>52</sup> McKenzie, 'The Staple of News', posits Pennyboy Junior as another of Jonson's quasi-monarchs. Perhaps in his growth to awareness of the populace's opinion(s), he acts as a paradigm of the need for limited monarchy.

In the believing lies are made for them,  
 As you i'th'Office, making them yourselves?  
 (I.v.42-45)<sup>53</sup>

John Milton's *Areopagitica* will not sound so different a few decades later:

Nor is it to the common people lesse than a reproach; for if we be so jealous over them, as that we dare not trust them with an English pamphlet, what doe we but censure them for a giddy, vitious, and ungrounded people; in such a sick and weak estate of faith and discretion, as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licencer . . . .<sup>54</sup>

*Areopagitica*, Milton's text on the freedom of the press, is undergoing critical revision at present. Many argue that it is a response to an increasingly capitalistic system, a demand for individual liberties, but critics such as Burt and Norbrook argue that Milton (like Jonson) was not anti-censorship *per se* but rather demanding new forms of it. Norbrook in particular sees it as a defensive text, a comment on the ideological struggles occurring in contemporary Europe, and says that we should view it against the background of Renaissance republicanism rather than later liberalism.<sup>55</sup> For a re-reading of Milton's pamphlet, he argues that we need to connect the development of Parliament, political

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<sup>53</sup> cf. *News from the World*, ll.48-51.

<sup>54</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica; For the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, To the Parliament of England* (1644), ed. by William Haller in *The Works of John Milton* IV, gen. ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), ll.16-22, p. 328.

<sup>55</sup> See Norbrook, '*Areopagitica*'. See also George Orwell and Reginald Reynolds, eds, *British Pamphleteers* (London: Wingate, 1948), I.



theory, literary history, and a study of the mass media. This is exactly what I argue is necessary for a re-evaluation of *The Staple of News* ; it needs to be seen as a response to the political crises of its own time and as an intervention in the debate over press and censorship, rather than as either a purely supportive or oppositional text.

Pennyboy Junior's debate with Fitton and Cymbal over the press prefigures modernist dilemmas about the fixity of form. For Fitton and Cymbal, the written as opposed to the printed retains a sense of being corruptible (that is possible to corrupt in the same way as their jeering corrupts language and conversation), yet in the text printing is regularly associated with waxen or melting metaphors and this would seem to deny their sense of rigidity. For them, however, printing accords a sense of fact and permanence that inclines people to believe what they read, whatever they read. As Pennyboy Junior recounts:

See divers men's opinions! Unto some,  
The very printing of them makes them news,  
That ha' not the heart to believe anything  
But what they see in print.  
(I.v.51-54)<sup>56</sup>

Print as a controlling force then only ever constitutes a superficial understanding of the form. In this play all constraints and controls prove to be somewhat artificial. Pennyboy Senior

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<sup>56</sup> cf. *News from the New World*, ll.57-59.

cannot maintain his oppressive regime over Pecunia any more than Pennyboy Junior proves able to buy and keep her attentions; with the kissing game the latter is as prodigal in love relationships as in all else. *The Staple of News* in this respect is also investigating the commodity of gender and its attendant fetishizations in a sophisticated manner. Pennyboy Canter's disguise is not a permanent fixture: his true self and his machinations must eventually be uncovered. Pennyboy Senior's descent into insanity, however comic with his trial of his beloved domestic dogs (a parody of the mock-trial of *King Lear*), is also a tragic indicator of the surface control we all possess over our emotions. Pennyboy Senior lacked control over his sexuality, incarcerating Pecunia and abusing her female servants. So dependent are we upon social veneers, on the readings that others produce of us, in the press and elsewhere, that if we feel control of these has slipped then our sense of social anchorage is completely unmoored.

For all the potential democratization and liberation of the print, the Staple office is by and large scornful of their target population:

REGISTER

'Tis the house of fame, sir,  
Where both the curious and the negligent,  
The scrupulous and careless, wild and staid,  
The idle and laborious; all do meet  
To taste the *cornucopiae* of her rumours,  
Which she, the mother of sport, pleaseth to scatter

Among the vulgar. Baits, sir, for the people!  
 And they will bite like fishes.  
 (III.ii.115-22)

As if to prove the Register's point a variety of customers arrive. The first couple are Anabaptists, the third is Lickfinger himself seeking some pamphlets to circulate at his forthcoming banquet. Court news is his initial hope: 'To strew out the long meal withal,' (III.ii.183) but he is happy to settle for news of the stage, of new plays, and the fate of acting companies.

The implicit interconnection of all these worlds is significant for Jonson. The recent censorship of Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1624) is alluded to, suppressed as it was following Count Gondomar's outrage at its anti-Spanish content and propagandistic effects during the unprecedented success of its initial nine-day run:<sup>57</sup>

LICKFINGER	What news of Gondomar?
THOMAS [ <i>Reading another roll</i> ]	A second fistula, Or an excoriation at the least, For putting the poor English play was writ of <div style="text-align: right;">him</div>
	To such a sordid use, as is said he did, Of cleansing his posteriors.
LICKFINGER	Justice! Justice!
THOMAS	Since when he lives condemned to his chair at <div style="text-align: right;">Brussels,</div> And there sits filing certain politic hinges To hang the States on h'has heaved off the hooks. <div style="text-align: right;">(III.ii.207-14)</div>

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<sup>57</sup> One of the major difficulties with the censorship debate and the early modern period is that we lose sight of the brevity of the performance life of these texts. *Bartholomew Fair* was performed only twice during Jonson's life and this may explain why censorship was more a response to the moment than a coordinated, coercive policy.

The reference is not only to the special chair which Gondomar had to accommodate his infamous fistula and which was notoriously used in actual English stage performances of *A Game at Chess* (1624), but also to Spanish offensives in the States General of the United Provinces, that is to say the Protestant Low Countries. The importance of that situation to Jonson's life and art was suggested in the introduction to this thesis, but it is worth recalling that many 1620s *corantos* were of Dutch origin: that republican context for print culture is highly significant.

Richard Burt regards this episode of *The Staple of News* as an 'excoriation' of Middleton but it would seem to me that the tone of the episode is sympathetic towards the 'poor' suppressed play and rather more anti-Gondomar in its focus.<sup>58</sup> The attack on Spanish aggressive policy in the United Provinces (that poignant image of states hung on 'politic hinges' for which Gondomar himself files the hooks) seems to be at the heart of the matter rather than a critical censuring, or censoring, of Middleton. This might suggest an anti-Spanish stance for the play which would seem supportive of Caroline policy towards Spain and critical of parliament's failure to provide funding for military preparations for war in 1625, but I would argue instead that it defends the potential republicanism involved in the allowing of critical,

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<sup>58</sup> See Burt, '(Un)Censoring in Detail'.

censoring texts, such as *A Game at Chess* and, by implication, *The Staple of News*, to be performed in the public sphere.

The majority of 1620s newsbooks were pro-Protestant but the political stance of the *Staple of news* is typically vague and insubstantial. Ostensibly it manufactures gossip (a male gossiping counterpart to the female audience of the *Intermeans*) and tabletalk and the journalists merely adapt the stance of stories to suit their intended recipients. The Anabaptists for example receive Protestant polemic in the pamphlets they purchase. *Staple* “emissaries” are assigned stories according to the stance they have been given; it is not necessarily their personal stance - in the ultimate capitalistic gesture they are simply defined by what makes money. When Pennyboy Junior enquires as to why Thomas lacks certain news stories from the Continent, Cymbal explains that this is ‘Because he keeps the Pontifical side’ (III.ii.63).<sup>59</sup> Pennyboy Junior immediately instructs Thomas to change sides (Thomas is still a bought man), declaring ‘I ventured not my money / Upon these terms.’ (III.ii.66-67), repurchasing the stories with the “politically correct” content. Money thus controls politics and the press in a manner frighteningly akin to the present day situation; Pennyboy Junior pays for Thomas to

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<sup>59</sup> cf. The Factor in *News from the New World* who declares: ‘I have my Puritan news, my Protestant news and my Pontifical news.’ (II.37-39).

rewrite the news. Jonson's own oscillations between Protestantism and Catholicism are perhaps also embedded in this episode. He is expertly capturing the uncertainties and instabilities of the early days of the print - its democratic potential is present but also its vulnerability to corruption, not least of the fiscal variety.

In terms of its historicity *The Staple of News* is a remarkable dramatic document.<sup>60</sup> In addition to capturing the emergent medium of the print and providing considerations of the new monarchy, it attends to complex questions of democracy, constitutional change, and social, civic, and intellectual property rights. Like the news-sheets that provide its subject-matter, this play, with a heightened sense of its politicized discourse, offers "news" of its own time and manner of production.

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<sup>60</sup> In an interesting example of textual instabilities, the printed text of *The Staple of News* prepared at least two years after the first performance, and possibly as late as 1631, added to the ending of the play. These interpolations reflect on the theme of civil liberties, even more prescient in 1628 after the King's dissolution of Parliament and the instigation of the "Personal Rule". Devra Kifer in 'Too Many Cookes: An Addition to the Printed Text of *The Staple of News*', *ELN*, 11.4 (1973), 264-271, has suggested that the additional section represents an attempt by Jonson to protect himself against charges of slandering the former Lord Chief Justice, Sir Edward Coke in the character of Pennyboy Senior. Coke had been in disgrace in 1626 the year of the play's first performance; he had effectively been banished to his county to perform the local duties of sheriff. By 1628 however he had regained his parliamentary position. He was one of the Petition of Right's main presenters and was opposed to the imprisonment of any subject without due process of the law yet this would seem to be the import of Pennyboy Senior's statements at (V.vi.42-47). Lickfinger questions his abuse of the 'liberty of the subjects' (V.vi.48) and Kifer suggests by making Lickfinger author of these views Jonson covered his own back against charges of libel, taking advantage of a possible pun on Coke and Cook.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: "HIS ART IN SOMETHING MORE YET HAD BEEN  
SEEN": THEATRICAL ALTERNATIVES AND ALTERNATIVE  
SOCIETIES: *THE NEW INN* AND THE LATE PLAYS

I: Theatres and marketplaces

*The New Inn* (1629) offers a number of theatrical alternatives. As the work of social historians of this period has detailed, inns were commonly places of entertainment - used for dicing, dancing, skittles, and 'sports';<sup>1</sup> the latter term describes the day's events in Jonson's dramatic creation. The Argument to the play (another textual marker of Jonson's anxiety to produce "right" readings of his texts) describes how Prudence, Lady Frances Frampul's chambermaid, is elected 'Governess of the Sports' for the day's shenanigans in 'The Light Heart': she is a mock-sovereign in true carnivalesque tradition. Her name denotes from the outset that she possesses one of the essential qualities for good government, if not the blood and breeding that usually determine such a position; this is perhaps further evidence of Jonson's ideological

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse, 1200-1830* (London and New York: Longmans, 1983); and 'The Alehouse and the Alternative Society', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. by Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 47-72; S.K. Roberts, 'Alehouses, Brewing, and Government under the Early Stuarts', *Southern History*, 2 (1980), 45-71; and Keith Wrightson, 'Alehouses, Order, and Reformation in Rural England, 1590-1660', in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914*, ed. by Eileen and Stephen Yeo (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 1-27.

support of a meritocracy as opposed to a hierarchy determined merely by birth, scarcely the stance of a radical but certainly demanding of constitutional change at this time.<sup>2</sup>

If, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, the marketplace was one of the prime *loci* of the carnivalesque,<sup>3</sup> then inns and alehouses became in the early modern period alternative marketplaces - there goods were frequently sold, or prices negotiated before the buyers and sellers reached market. Inns could even provide an alternative barter economy whereby victuals could be received or credit given instead of a straightforward financial transaction. The inn was a potential replacement for the parish church in a time of sociological transition.<sup>4</sup> The inn also signified a marketplace of sorts in its conglomeration of guests of different rank, background, and gender: akin indeed to the heterogeneous gathering at Bartholomew Fair in Jonson's eponymous play. If the latter locus is, as many critics have suggested, a form of theatre, then so too is 'The Light Heart'.

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that Prudence is her title only in the printed text of the play: in first performances she was called Cicely and the alteration may have been an effort on Jonson's part to further signify her important position within the play.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> See Clark, 'The Alehouse and Alternative Society'.



Jonson examines the nature of illusion in general and of theatrical illusion in particular in *The New Inn*.<sup>5</sup> A number of characters are playing assumed roles; the chambermaid assumes the guise of Queen for a day, eliciting numerous jokes and theatrical references - the Host declaring that he always wanted to kiss the Queen. When we first see Pru onstage, she and Lady Frances are troubled by the fact that the dress commissioned for the occasion has failed to arrive (causing a sadistic articulation of the proposed vengeance to be performed on the tailor). Lady Frances's solution is to lend Pru a dress of her own; Pru is considerably troubled by the social implications of dressing in her mistress's attire for such pranks. As if the dress is somehow soiled by such usage and therefore needs must be handed on (the missing dress will have a far more debased usage, employed as it is in the erotic and social fantasies of the tailor and his wife), Lady Frances suggests that it be subsequently sold on to a company of players. This promotes further concern on Pru's behalf:

LADY FRANCES

Twill fit the players yet  
When thou hast done with it, and yield thee  
somewhat.

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Harriet Hawkins, 'The Idea of the Theater in Jonson's *The New Inn*', *RenD*, n.s. 9 (1966), 205-26.

PRUDENCE                      That were illiberal, madam, and mere sordid  
    In me, to let a suit of yours come there.  
 LADY FRANCES              Tut, all are players and but serve the scene, Pru;  
    ( *The New Inn*, II.i.35-39)<sup>6</sup>

The '*theatrum mundi*' theory expounded here by Lady

Frances has already been voiced by the Host:

If I be honest, and that all the cheat  
 Be of myself, in keeping this Light Heart,  
 Where I imagine all the world's a play:  
 The state and men's affairs, all passages  
 Of life, to spring new scenes, come in, go out,  
 And shift and vanish; and if I have got  
 A seat to sit at ease here, i'mine inn,  
 To see the comedy; and laugh and chuck  
 At the variety and throng of humours  
 And dispositions that come justling in  
 And out still, as they one drove hence another -  
 Why, will you envy me my happiness?  
 Because you are sad and lumpish?  
    (I.iii.126-38)

The Host's comments both oppose Lovel's melancholia, out of place at the Light Heart, and expose it as an assumed persona - a part Lovel is playing to an extreme when the play commences and which prompts the dialogue between himself and the Host, a dialectic which dissolves rapidly enough into friendship and toleration.<sup>7</sup> The Host is an apt person to express such views since he himself has assumed the role of "Goodstock" the inn host<sup>8</sup> - his

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<sup>6</sup> All subsequent play quotations in this chapter are from *The New Inn* unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> The Host instructs Lovel to 'Carry a loadstone', a jewel to attract; Jonson would use this idea to further effect in *The Magnetic Lady* (1632), where the attractive lady of the title, Lady Loadstone, draws all manner of guests to her dinner parties - another alternative social marketplace or theatre.

<sup>8</sup> The Chaucerian resonances of this character are interesting for a dramatist so often linked to purely classical precedents. For an interesting argument in favour of Jonson's medieval literary inheritance, see Robert



Pru acknowledges the mock-court established at the inn as a kind of theatre. Dissolving the court she has presided over with such authority and clarity of vision, Pru announces: 'The court's dissolved, removed and the play ended; / No sound or air of love more, I decree it.' (IV.iv.248-49), thus plunging Lovel into a state of abject despair, worse than that he was in at the start:

From what a happiness hath that one word  
 Thrown me, into the gulf of misery!  
 To what a bottomless despair! How like  
 A court removing or an ended play  
 Shows my abrupt precipitate estate;  
 By how much more my vain hopes were increased  
 By these false hours of conversation!  
 (IV.iv.250-56)<sup>9</sup>

The Pru-Lovel exchange also invokes Prospero's 'Our Revels now are ended' speech which peremptorily ends the wedding masque for Miranda and Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. That play is often held up to *The New Inn* (along with other Jonsonian drama, as we have seen) for comparative purposes. If an act of appropriation by Jonson is occurring here, it is interesting to consider that it may be of a more radical and revisionist Shakespeare than many critics have previously been willing to accept. David Norbrook has recently, and convincingly, argued for

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<sup>9</sup> These lines are a version of John Donne's 'The Calme', a poem Jonson valued highly; Drummond reports this in section seven of the *Conversations*:

He esteemeth John Donne the first poet in the world in some things. His verses of the lost chain he hath by heart; and that passage of 'The Calme', that dust and feathers do not stir, all was so quiet. Affirmeth Donne to have written all his best pieces ere he was twenty-five years old.

(Donaldson, p. 597, ll.86-89)

a republican context for *The Tempest* (1611), consequently questioning its unqualified placement within the Romance canon:

*The Tempest* is a hard-headed play . . . As several critics have noted, it is not so much that the play is a romance, as that it stages, and in the process distances itself from, the romance scenario of dynastic redemption that Prospero is staging.<sup>10</sup>

‘The Light Heart’, it must be said, is no Arden or Illyria, no dreamscape where lives are dramatically altered; under the stricter conventions of carnival, when the play ends and all costumes are removed, the household returns to normal. Prudence, for all her abilities as a ruler, does not turn out to be a long lost princess in the tradition of Perdita or Marina but remains a sane and sensible chambermaid; admittedly the romance convention of marriage is allowed her in a way it was not allowed Phoenixella in Jonson’s early play *The Case is Altered* (1597), but the point is surely that Lord Latimer marries Pru with her case remaining distinctly unaltered. Latimer proposes simply out of love and regardless of rank and that is perhaps Jonson’s most subversive intervention in the genre of Romance, which had tended to demand marriage within the boundaries of strictly determined social groups: a form of literary endogamy which *The New Inn* has the courage to challenge. Lovel and Lady Frances are

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<sup>10</sup> David Norbrook, ‘ “What Cares These Roarers for the Name of King?”: Language and Utopia in *The Tempest*’, in McMullan and Hope, pp. 21-54 (p. 26).

scarcely faultless aristocrats and the rational good sense of Pru has a distinctly levelling effect upon the play as a whole.

## II: A tale of a pub

Of great significance is the political period in which this play was written. *The New Inn* has often been labelled a 'late romance' by critics as a convenient excuse for ignoring its compositional context - that is to say not merely the time of the Caroline masque and of neo-platonism at court,<sup>11</sup> although these too feature in the make-up of this play, but more specifically of 1628. That was the year of the Petition of Right and the year in which Charles I would dissolve Parliament (like courts removing or plays ending?), not to summon another until some eleven years later when Ben Jonson would be dead and England would be taking its first hesitant steps towards civil war.

Whereas the *loci* of Jonson's Jacobean plays have been the subject of intense critical scrutiny, the romance labelling of *The New Inn* seems to have led to a omission in critical discussions of adequate consideration of the drama's inn-house setting. 'The Light Heart' is in Barnet, nowadays a suburb of North London, but

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<sup>11</sup> See Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restored: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981).

in Jonson's time rather further removed from the city's edge, an important staging point on the old post road. Watson suggests that 'the location of the inn . . . may reflect the location of the play halfway between the satiric world of city-comedy and the romantic world of pastoral.'<sup>12</sup> The exact topography is, as always in Jonson, significant: the later plays interest themselves in these rural communities barely within sight of Westminster, and yet frequently exploited by it - witness Tottenham Court and Finsbury Park in *A Tale of a Tub*. The aristocratic participants in the day's sports (disguised or otherwise) are not attending some large private-house gathering: the Light Heart is no Penshurst. They are in a public place, mingling with other levels and sectors of society, and not necessarily always on their own terms.

Inns, alehouses, and taverns (and these are distinctions to which I wish to return) witnessed massive expansion during the Tudor and Stuart reigns. Admirable work by social historians such as Peter Clark and Keith Wrightson has demonstrated the importance of public drinking houses in social, financial, and political terms and such work has much to offer any reading of *The New Inn*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Watson, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Clark, *The English Alehouse*, and Wrightson, 'Alehouses, Order, and Reformation'.

Alehouses tended to represent the lower end of the drinking-house spectrum and had various synonyms in the Stuart period - tippling houses, boozing kens, tup houses. Taverns sold wine to the more prosperous but could not offer lodgings. By comparison, inns tended to be large, often fashionable, establishments offering wine, ale, and beer, together with, often elaborate, food and lodging to well-heeled travellers and since their facades tended to dominate the main street of a given community they were important cultural centres. Clark recounts that some establishments, like the New Inn at Gloucester, followed a courtyard plan, with four ranges, two or more storeys high surrounding a central yard - these were often employed for a theatrical purpose. Impressive inn-signs, furnished in wood or elaborate wrought iron, overarched the road, to draw in customers, just like the South Bank theatres.<sup>14</sup> In the 1570s some inns were able to lodge as many as two to three hundred people - equivalent to a theatre audience.

Drawn into the interior of 'The Light Heart' is a variable community - varied in terms of rank, gender, and background; the setting provides a typically Jonsonian cross-section of society. As with the fair in *Bartholomew Fair*, there are present both guests

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<sup>14</sup> cf. Richard Dutton, 'Hamlet, An Apology for Actors and the Sign of the Globe', *ShS*, 41 (1989), 35-43.



and those whose livelihood depends upon the inn: no-one more so than Fly, who the Host claims to have received as part of the 'household stuff' when given the inventory of the place:

I had him when I came to take the inn here,  
Assigned me over in the inventory  
As an old implement, a piece of household-stuff,  
And so he doth remain.

(II.iv.16-19)

Goodstock later contradicts this tale by implying that Fly was one of the band of gypsies with whom he previously took up and travelled, but the story nevertheless indicates Fly's dependence upon the inn. He is, as his name suggests, and like his forebear Mosca, a parasite, but one living less directly off his master than off the establishment he owns.

The staffing of such establishments was important: 'Inns usually had a bevy of maids, tapsters, chamberlains, and ostlers to serve the multitude of guests.'<sup>15</sup> A glimpse at Jonson's *dramatis personae* for this play reveals just that: we have Jordan the chamberlain, aptly named after the word for a chamberpot (no doubt one of his primary responsibilities), Jug the tapster, and Peck the ostler. According to Clark, a number of these servants were often hired orphans, particularly in lower class establishments (the same is true of many boy actors in the

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<sup>15</sup> Clark, *The English Alehouse*, p. 7.

London boys companies) and we witness the same phenomenon in the Host's adoption of the "boy Frank" and "his" attendant nurse.

The Host of *The New Inn*, though in a job of service, still discourses in lordly terms, telling the melancholic Lovel:

It is against my freehold, my inheritance,  
My *magna charta*, *cor laetificat*,  
To drink such balderdash, or bonny-clabbee!  
(I.ii.23-25)

Lovel is surprised that someone as articulate as Goodstock should elect to pursue such a lowly profession:

methinks a man  
Of your sagacity, and clear nostril, should  
Have made another choice than of a place  
So sordid as the keeping of an inn:  
(I.iii.109-12)

In expressing such a pronounced opinion, Lovel is voicing a common theory of the age that only the lowest sectors of society - morally and financially - ran alehouses and taverns, thus rendering them breeding grounds for thieves and canting crews, and general drunkenness and disorder. It does appear from historical records that a majority of alehouse owners were poor - often forced to take up victualling for want of any other trade - but this did not necessarily hold true across the spectrum: inn-house keepers did become important if not elite members of the community.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Nicholl, in *The Reckoning* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), his recent book of ruminations upon the death of Christopher Marlowe, records how similar prejudice and cultural stereotyping has led to the popular notion of the Deptford establishment where Marlowe died or was

Like the theatres, the drinking houses of the early modern period were railed against, often in extremist puritan pamphlets, as harbourers of religious non-conformity and general moral disorder, and as purveyors of paganism in their festivals and entertainments. All of this invective had a strong political dimension, particularly subsequent to the publication in 1617 of King James's *Book of Sports* ; James recognized the political value of sports and entertainments as a means of releasing and controlling public energies.<sup>17</sup> There certainly appears to be a political motive to Goodstock's mirth in *The New Inn* ; he defends against social prejudice those who are forced by circumstance to pursue such lifestyles, instructing Lovel that not all are as blessed and fortunate as he.

### III: The citizens of the inn, or the "house of commons"

In the course of their dialogue, Lovel learns from the Host's moral instruction (undoubtedly a Jonsonian theatrical ideal) to have a lighter heart. In the second courtroom assembly of the play he debates the meaning of *virtù*, an ongoing debate in Jonson's drama

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murdered as a sleazy pub, when in truth it was a highly reputable inn and lodgings house run by an eminent citizen's widow.

<sup>17</sup> cf. Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*.

as we have seen; his speech is largely culled from Seneca but nevertheless in its humanitarian, pacifist, and republican ethos, something of Ben Jonson may also be heard:

The things true valour is exercised about  
 Are poverty, restraint, captivity,  
 Banishment, loss of children, long disease:  
 The least is death.  
 (IV.iv.106-09)

Like Lovel, Jonson learned not to be angry with the ostlers, the tapsters, and the under-officers, to celebrate their diversity, and even not to be angry with those above him in rank and responsibility. He stared poverty and disease in the face in the final few years of his life; he had lost his wife and children, was effectively banished the court, and, restrained by a stroke, was virtually bed-ridden at the end. He seems almost to have been preparing for such eventualities when he wrote these magniloquent lines for Lovel in 1629:

I am kept out a masque, sometime thrust out,  
 Made wait a day, two, three, for a great word  
 Which (when it comes forth) is all frown and forehead:  
 What laughter should this breed rather than anger!  
 Out of the tumult of so many errors,  
 To feel with contemplation mine own quiet!  
 If a great person do me an affront  
 A giant of the time, sure I will bear it,  
 Or out of the time, sure I will bear it.  
 (IV.iv.184-92)

The calm descent into monosyllables is stunning.

Jonson was able to look to a time when his works would be 'out of the time'; at the beginning of *The New Inn* Lovel believes,

albeit somewhat nostalgically, in the chivalric code of honour and a correlative feudal system:

Call you that desperate, which by a line  
 Of institution from our ancestors  
 Hath been derived down to us, and received  
 In a succession for the noblest way  
 Of breeding up our youth in letters, arms,  
 Fair mien, discourses, civil exercise,  
 And all the blazon of a gentleman?  
 Where he can learn to vault, to ride, to fence,  
 To move his body gracefuller, to speak  
 His language purer, or to tune his mind  
 Or manners more to the harmony of nature  
 Than in these nurseries of nobility?  
 (I.iii.40-51)

Many critics regard this as the central political argumentation of the play but to do so ignores its early positioning, the changes undergone by Lovel, and the Host's answering skepticism:<sup>18</sup>

Ay, that was when the nursery's self was noble,  
 And only virtue made it, not the market,  
 That titles were not vented at the drum  
 Or common outcry;  
 (I.iii.52-55)

Goodstock is here attacking the Sale of Titles which was one of the infamous emergency or "extraordinary" measures taken by the bankrupt Stuart Treasury, and which led to the creation of "mushroom knights" (see Fungoso in *Every Man Out*) who sprang up overnight by dint of their financial buying power; in doing so Goodstock is also counselling Lovel in the need to respond to the actualities of the present instead of yearning for some false arcadia of the past.

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<sup>18</sup> Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, invokes the latter only in order to discuss nostalgia. See also her 'The New Inn and the Problem of Jonson's Late Style', *ELR*, 9 (1979), 395-418.

If the noble academies have themselves become so corrupt, Goodstock suggests that it is entirely plausible that an alehouse or inn might be a site of better qualities: Pru is surely confirmation of this. 'The Light Heart' functions as a quasi-pastoral setting; it is not London and yet not quite the country either, but on the margins of each. The alternative community it offers also represents a subtle critique of the Court and its environs.

In considering Lovel's chivalric code critics seem persistently blinded to his overly idealistic and frankly snobbish views which are so obviously qualified throughout by the Host's statements and thus nurtured into offering a more expansive and tolerant outlook. One of the educative processes of 'The Light Heart' is to instruct Lovel in the value of community - of interhierarchal community - something he is clearly unappreciative of at the outset of the play:

An host to find me! Who is, commonly  
 The log, a little o'this side the sign-post;  
 Or, at the best, some round-grown thing, a jug  
 Faced with a beard, that fills out to the guests,  
 And takes in fro' the fragments o'their jests!  
 (I.iv.11-15)

In comparing the bearded and portly Host to a jug Lovel is making a pun on the inn's serving containers but he also invokes a comparison between Goodstock and Jonson. The dramatist consistently fashioned himself as a container in his own poems,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> cf. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise*.

and by this stage of his career he was also a jovial and tolerant host with the same interhierarchical perspective and experience. The leaning seems rather to identify Jonson with the Host's anti-nostalgic discourse than Lovel's initial extremism.

Lovel's initial absolutist discourse is in truth closer to that of the ridiculous Colonel Glorious Tipto, an antecedent of *Every Man In's* Bobadill(a), and one of the more regular customers at 'The Light Heart'. Tipto talks of the inn as a city-state republic, but more specifically as Sparta. Simon Hornblower has outlined the political paradox represented by the Spartan constitution:

The history of European democracy begins arguably not in Athens but in Sparta. This is a paradox because Sparta has usually been seen as the opposite of the 'Open Society' which Periclean Athens is taken, by a simplification, to represent. But youthful Sparta was different from the totalitarian monster she grew up to be. A constitutional document, whose date and interpretation are one of the fiercest battlegrounds of ancient Greek history, stipulates that a Spartan popular assembly should meet at regular intervals . . . .<sup>20</sup>

Jonson would have known that the "republic" of Sparta (also a major focus of Machiavelli's *Discourses*) had two kings, and Tipto certainly envisages himself as the oligarch of his particular city-state. He similarly assumes command of the inn's 'citizen militia' - that primary requisite of the successful republic according to the *Discourses*. He is akin in this to the monomaniac Sir Epicure

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Hornblower, 'Creation and Development of Democratic Institutions in Ancient Greece', in *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*, ed. by John Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-16 (p. 1).

Mammon in *The Alchemist* who also dreamed of an alternative society which he would rule. The inn-house environment, let alone the drink, contributes to Tipto's delusions of grandeur: 'the alehouse was perceived as the command-post of men who sought to turn the traditional world upside-down and create their own alternative society.'<sup>21</sup>

The theme, albeit comic, of a citizen militia was a contemporary reference since Charles I's accession to the throne in 1625 witnessed an immediate stepping-up in the recruitment and training of local militia: much of this recruitment took place in drinking establishments. This was something which had lapsed during James's reign; even in the midst of the Palatinate crisis, James, in his self-assigned role as European peacemaker, had been reluctant to approve Buckingham's voluble calls for war against Spain. In 1624, despite apparent concession to that year's Parliament over the issue, James still delayed the actual raising of any citizen forces and so it was not until his death in 1625 that anti-Habsburg military preparations began in earnest.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Clark, 'The Alehouse and Alternative Society', p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the political events of the early 1620s see Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution*; Simon Adams, 'Foreign Policy and the Parliaments of 1621 and 1624', in *Faction and Parliament: Essays on Early Stuart History*, ed. by Kevin Sharpe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 139-71; and Christopher Thompson, 'Court Politics and Parliamentary Conflict in 1625', in Cust and Hughes, pp. 168-92.



Tipto, who is to be Colonel of this particular motley crew, is another glorious example of consumption in the Mammonian vein. His projects soon far exceed their locality. Tipto half-jokingly names Fly as 'Lipsius Fly', thus comparing him to the Dutch political and military author Justus Lipsius whose influence on Jonson has been well-documented,<sup>23</sup> imagining him as too good for 'The Light Heart'. Yet Fly as we have seen is dependent upon the Inn for survival. Similar notions held amongst the upper levels of society that the alehouse, inn or tavern might constitute a hotbed of political and republican sedition were equally exaggerated:

There was no master-plan for a new levelling republic commanded from the alehouse. Rather the tippling-house's growing importance as a social and commercial centre was primarily a development that occurred in response to the major economic, social and other changes affecting society in the century or more before the English Civil War. The alehouse stood less in the van than in the baggage train of an alternative society.<sup>24</sup>

Jonson seems to be gently mocking such political anxieties in the Tipto/militia scenes but he is also registering the increasing usage of the inn as a political as well as social meeting-place, and as a means of levying troops. Despite his comment that there was no master-plan for a republic born in alehouses, Clark acknowledges that inns and taverns were the favoured assembly

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<sup>23</sup> See Evans, *Jonson, Lipsius*.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, 'The Alehouse and Alternative Society', p. 159.

points of the Levellers in the 1640s. Governmental activities also took place there - local meetings which were themselves a source of tension due to their often oppositional stance towards the policies of central government:

Most important county business was transacted at inns up to the late eighteenth century, including meetings of quarter and petty sessions, committees to levy taxes and troops, enclosure and bankruptcy commissions, canal companies and turnpike trusts.<sup>25</sup>

The seventeenth century had been party to a storm of invective against drinking establishments and yet, as in the case of censorship (see Chapter Ten), early Stuart policies aimed at regulating and controlling them can at best be described as fluctuating. One reason for this is that patents, licences, and drinking taxes for inns were a crucial source of revenue (then as now), and the treasury was, as we have seen, already hard-pressed. The corrupting effects of this reached their zenith in 1617 with the sale of the monopoly on the granting of inn licences throughout England to three men - Giles Bridge of Hereford, James Thurborne of Middlesex, and Sir Giles Mompesson.

Mompesson is the most renowned of the three - the licensing procedure was supposedly an attempt to limit the number of illegally-controlled inns and yet he steadfastly abused the system by selling to all and sundry: 'The Mompesson patent

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

abdicated the responsibilities of executive government in favour of satisfying patronage demands at court.’<sup>26</sup> His indictment was one of the main foci of the monopolies-focused 1621 parliament. The character of Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1625, published 1633) is believed to be partially-based on Mompesson. Interestingly enough, *The New Inn* exhibits a strong awareness of the Massinger precedent not only in the locale (in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* the opening situation is a tavern run by the aptly-named Tapwell and his wife, although this is a distinctly more disreputable establishment than ‘The Light Heart’) but also in the naming of the character Lovel (Massinger’s presiding lord is called Lovell).

In an article on ‘Late Jonson’ Martin Butler has mapped out the more immediate political context of this play:

The political interest of *The New Inn* derives from its composition immediately prior to the recall of the last of Charles’s early Parliaments, in March 1629 . . . the play may be read as partly a response to the expectations of a moment in which rapprochement or accommodation, rather than confrontation, might at last have been achieved between the court and the court’s critics - expectations brought about, needless to say, by the assassination of Buckingham six months earlier. With Buckingham removed, the possibilities of a new relationship between King and Parliament became suddenly available . . . .<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Roberts, ‘Alehouses, Brewing, and Government’, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, ‘Late Jonson’, p. 172. In fact, the 1629 parliament was the crucial second session of the 1628 parliament, dissolved amidst heated debate over the Petition of Right. Summoned on 20 January 1629, it was dissolved on 2 March. For a detailed account, see Sharpe, *The Personal Rule*. *The New Inn* was registered on 19 January 1629 (1628 in seventeenth-century terms since New Year began 25 March) and performed in March.

James VI and I and Charles I both frequently sacrificed governmental responsibility over drinking houses in the face of more immediate financial needs, enforcing and ignoring regulations (not least on monopolies) as it suited them. Such political vacillation could be seen as a contributing factor in the eventual dissolution of the much anticipated 1629 session of parliament, amidst an atmosphere of political questions and grievances.

#### IV: The parliament of love?

In 1610 James VI and I had declared in a speech to the Lower House that he sought to create at that session a 'parliament of love'.<sup>28</sup> In theatrical terms it is self-evident that the Court or Parliament of Love scenes provide the central motif of *The New Inn*.

Much useful critical work has been done on the sources and origins of this motif, especially so by Michael Hattaway in his Revels edition of the play; he demonstrates the way in which Jonson draws on a triple strand of influence. There is a medieval strand, that is to say, the medieval courts or parliaments of love,

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<sup>28</sup> See Paul Christianson, 'Royal and Parliamentary Voices on the Ancient Constitution, c.1604-1621,' in Peck, *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, pp. 71-95.

such as in Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* ; there are the Renaissance 'banquets' or symposia; and, in so far as the parliament of 'The Light Heart' is presided over by a chambermaid, a servant of the household or group gathered there, there is the carnival tradition of electing a Lord of Misrule for the day. The latter instance was a common occurrence in Elizabethan revelry and Shakespeare's Falstaff is often felt to represent a type of this.

That Jonson elects as his figure of misrule a woman, and a working-class one at that, is significant as part of a wider expansion of roles for women in his later drama, or at least of female roles for boy actors. *The New Inn* alone has five important and articulate female characters. The venison for the Sherwood Forest feast in *The Sad Shepherd* (1637) is killed not as might be expected by Robin Hood but by Marian:

ROBIN	Had you good sport i'your chase to day?	
JOHN		O prime!
MARIAN	A lusty Stagge!	
ROBIN		And hunted yee at force?
MARIAN	In a full cry!	
JOHN		And never hunted change!
ROBIN	You had staunch Hounds then?	
MARIAN		Old and sure, I love
	No young rash dogs, no more then changing friends.	(I.vi.21-25) <sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The edition of *The Sad Shepherd; or, A Tale of Robin-hood* used throughout is that contained within *H & S VII*, henceforth *The Sad Shepherd*.

Not only is Marian a strong and articulate character whose cloning by the witch Maudlin (another emblem of female agency in the text) forms a large section of the extant scenes, but her romantic relationship with Robin is clearly a 'mature', 'settled', and affectionate one.<sup>30</sup> The Robin-Marian pairing has a possible precursor in the shape of Lovel and Lady Frances; the lovers, like the courtroom situation of their love, are an innovative reworking of an old theme.

In recounting the long literary history of the motif of a parliament or court of love,<sup>31</sup> Hattaway observes:

as a parliament it was an assembly in which noble men and women assembled to hear 'questions' of love, definitions or praises of love, or to discuss matters of etiquette; as a court it served to resolve differences.<sup>32</sup>

This functions well as a working definition of the Court of Love in *The New Inn* but its suggestion of the movement towards

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<sup>30</sup> The terms are Barton's; see *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*.

<sup>31</sup> The proceedings of a court of love are set out in the *locus classicus*, the *Aresta Amorum, sive Processus inter Amantes cum Decisionibus Parlamenti* of Martial d'Auvergne, written circa 1455, and which went through more than 35 editions between 1500 and 1734. Actual assemblies such as were described here had been held in Europe, although there are no records of such proceedings in England: however a number of the entertainments devised for Elizabeth I bore obvious resemblance (in that respect this particular choice of motif could be seen as another nostalgic strategy). Certainly a number of playtexts at this time recognized the stage potential of such events - Heywood's, *Play of Love*, Marston's *The Faun*, and Massinger's *The Parliament of Love* amongst them (unfortunately the latter survives only in mutilated form and we are unsure if it was ever performed). See Michael Hattaway's introductory essay to his Revels edition of *The New Inn* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). All references to this essay, henceforth Hattaway.

<sup>32</sup> Hattaway, p. 30.

resolution through debate has led Butler to regard this as proof once again of the play's, and Jonson's, unquestioning endorsement of the Caroline Court and its policies, in this case in 1629. To me the play does not seem so clear cut in any direction to allow for discussion of 'endorsement'; it would be false to describe the play as an explicit critique of monarchy but nevertheless, as in *A Tale of a Tub*, the plot's romantic resolution should not blind us to potentially more subversive ideas contained elsewhere in the text. There is a radical subtext to the dialogue and debates of the courtroom scenes and it is one of which Jonson was fully aware.<sup>33</sup> That the main event of the play should be a mock-parliament when, as Butler himself has shown, that very play was licensed only ten days before the new parliament assembled in 1629 is a coincidence that cannot be regarded as dramatically tangential; it charges the political vocabulary of the relevant scenes, not with nostalgia but with topical importance.

What has been recognized as topical in the play is its employment of neo-platonist themes and ideas. The academic debate or symposium which is also an important source for Jonson's play has as its classical archetype Plato's dialogue on love,

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<sup>33</sup> I am not of the Marxist school that seeks to imply that Jonsonian texts contain a subversive element which he himself neither recognized nor intended but which can be traced through the operations of language itself. See, for example, Womack, *Ben Jonson*.

the *Symposium*. This text had a huge influence on early modern literature from Sidney and Spenser through to George Herbert's *The Temple* in 1633; Jonson is no exception - a number of Lovel's lengthy discourses on love are directly transcribed from Plato. In addition, some of the love debates in *The New Inn* resemble Book IV of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. If Lovel articulates conventional neo-platonic doctrine as espoused in Castiglione by Cardinal Bembo, then Lord Beaufort is the voice of the Ovidian sensualist. In accordance with Jonson's complex relationship with Ovid (see Chapter Three), Beaufort's views are not entirely discounted within the play; his reflections reveal the impracticalities of a doctrine that counsels that love can and should survive without descending to the fleshly. This debate often featured in the poetry of John Donne and Jonson himself had dealt with it as early as 1601 in *Poetaster*.

Charles I's wife, Henrietta Maria, is the person most often attributed with bringing the cult of neo-platonism, along with a large number of her French courtiers, to England, thus rendering the English monarchy a wholly more Eurocentric affair than it had been under the parochial James VI and I.<sup>34</sup> It is now a literary commonplace that the Caroline masques reflect these new Eurocentric tastes and interests.

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<sup>34</sup> cf. Parry, *The Golden Age Restored*.



In contrast to his Jacobean commissions Jonson was largely excluded from these Caroline masques composing his last, *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, where he did indeed celebrate the myths of Plato, in 1631. This exclusion also appears to have increased with the years, as the Caroline court established its identity, and Henrietta Maria became a more powerful force both at court and upon her husband. Jonson's personality now seemed 'out of the time' in an era of more refined and elitist court drama.<sup>35</sup> This exclusivity is precisely not the case with the inn-house gathering of 'The Light Heart' or the public theatre play *The New Inn*. Neo-platonic strains in the text have been concentrated on to the detriment of more politicized and parliamentary strains.

Hattaway acknowledges in passing the political sphere of reference in the play's language:

Jonson's assembly is both a court of justice to which Lovel brings a Bill of Complaint for the disrespect he has 'conceived if not received' (II.vi.143) from Lady [Frances] Frampul, and a parliament in which he propounds *quaestiones* of love and valour.<sup>36</sup>

Butler carries this a stage further, acknowledging that whilst this assembly is strictly speaking a court of love and not a parliament,

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<sup>35</sup> Henrietta Maria herself took part in many of these productions and is credited with having presaged the advent of female actors on the stage at the time of her son's 1660 restoration. See Sophie Tomlinson, 'She that Plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture', in McMullan and Hope, pp. 189-207.

<sup>36</sup> Hattaway, p. 31.

Pru is nevertheless a mock-sovereign and she and the other characters 'have a way of creating situations or using language which resonate with the political discourse of 1628-9.'<sup>37</sup>

V: The state of the stage: *The New Inn*, *The Magnetic Lady*, and *Magna Carta*

The Host invokes Magna Carta in his opening debate with Lovel. On the surface this might be taken as the Host revealing his true aristocratic background by speaking in the language of monarchy and government, for Magna Carta was a non-authoritarian, not a non-aristocratic, document; indeed, defining aristocratic rights was one of its contemporary manoeuvres. Magna Carta was a significant document in the history of monarchy since it sought to curb and constrain the powers and prerogative of King John:

Seventeenth-century Parliamentarians who quoted Magna Carta were perhaps nearer the mark than they have sometimes been recognised to be. The crisis which produced Magna Carta was an unpopular and unsuccessful foreign war, and no less than two thirds of Magna Carta's clauses prohibited various methods by which the king had been raising money. Many more crises occurred before the principle was firmly established that the king needed the consent of the political community for extraordinary taxation, and even more before it was clear that Parliament was the proper body to express that consent.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Butler, 'Late Jonson', p. 173.

<sup>38</sup> Conrad Russell, 'Parliament and the King's Finances', in Russell, *The Origins of the English Civil War*, pp. 91-116 (p. 91). See also Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, pp. 72-74.

Similar grievances over extraordinary taxation would gain ground amongst parliamentarian support groups during the period of personal rule, reaching their zenith in 1640 with the abolition of the universally despised Ship Money. Yet what the Host's use of terminology indicates is that discussions centering on the King's accountability to the political community, an idea enshrined in the document of Magna Carta, were current in the late 1620s and, in particular, both prior and subsequent to the issuing of the Petition of Right in 1628.

Jonson would use the term 'Magna Carta' in another intriguing instance in *The Magnetic Lady* (1632). Damplay, a Chorus member of sorts, insists upon his '*Magna Charta* of reprehension,' (*The Magnetic Lady*, III. Chorus, ll.24-25), citing his ancient precedent for this, just as parliamentarians would cite the ancient constitution in defence of their manoeuvres against the monarchy in the 1640s. Damplay is an interesting figure in this respect: his nomenclature might suggest that Jonson requests spectators and readers to dismiss him as a character, since he damns the very medium in which they all believe. Damplay also proves an advocate of Spenserian themes and plot-lines in the theatre; again Jonson might appear to reject this notion wholesale and yet *The Sad Shepherd* would be distinctly Spenserian in tone and event - Aeglamour the melancholic knight mimetically

reenacting Colin Clout's romantic grief in *The Shepheardes Calendar* and the female substitution theme directly imitating the "false" Florimel plotline of *The Faerie Queene*. Like the Spenserian text, theatre was a medium with which Jonson had a highly problematized relationship and Damplay could therefore be another flip-side character, questioning the absolutism which Jonson intermittently required in the theatrical domain. Damplay charges Jonson with a kind of authorial tyranny in his intervening discussions with the Boy:

Why, Boy? This were a strange Empire, or rather a Tyrannie, you would entitle your Poet to, over Gentlemen, that they should come to heare, and see *Playes*, and say nothing for their money.

(*The Magnetic Lady*, II. Chorus, 53-56)

Damplay demands a say as a paying client or customer; the induction to the play is noticeably articulated in the language and terminology of shopkeeping: a contemporary reference since a number of the theatres were part-financed by the Grocers' Guild, who then set up shop within the confines of the buildings (the Rose theatre is an example of this).<sup>39</sup> The Induction also stresses the sense of the play-text as a commodity for sale: in that respect, Jonson is but one part of the whole intellectual and financial transaction that constitutes theatregoing. He appears simultaneously, almost schizophrenically, to have recognized this

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<sup>39</sup> My thanks to Andrew Gurr for this information.

fact in his career, if also occasionally struggling against its apparent injustices.

When *The Magnetic Lady* is accorded rare critical attention, the ubiquitous point appears to be that Compass and Ironside, those ‘honest, and adopted’ brothers of the text (*The Magnetic Lady*, II.vi.145) represent contradictory sides of Jonson’s own nature: the urbane epigrammatist and the brawling soldier who boasted of killing men in the Netherlands whilst a soldier there. More intriguing however are the contradictions contained within the single figure of Captain Rudibras Ironside - his very name a heterogeneous yoking of fictional Spenserian knight and real infantry member; therein lies a truly Jonsonian dilemma. Ironside’s surname would later come to be suggestive of the Parliamentary forces and in particular the New Model Army - the nickname derived from the appearance of their armour; yet Ironside wears the feather in his cap more typically suggestive of a cavalier or royalist soldier. The distinctions may not yet have been fully formulated in 1632 but the point is rather that Ironside is an uncomfortable and often confused accommodation of the battlefield and puritan austerity along with urbanity and socialism (the latter figured in his eventual marriage to Lady Loadstone, the magnetic lady of the title). At times one sphere invades the other, as when he threatens the dinner guests at

Loadstone's alluring house. In this simple construction Jonson is figuring many of the tensions, social, religious, and political, of the early 1630s, as puritan notions did theoretical battle in social circles with the decadence and extravagance of an increasingly distanced and detached court. The billeting of soldiers on often unwilling households, many of whom had refused to pay the so-called benevolence, or "Forced Loan", of 1626, was a major grievance of the 1628-29 sessions of parliament and this may not only have influenced Jonson's portrayal of the ultimately expelled Colonel Tipto in *The New Inn* but also have been recalled by him when creating Ironside in the early 1630s.<sup>40</sup>

In the Induction to *The Magnetic Lady* Probee declares: 'Wee are sent unto you, indeed, from the people.' (*The Magnetic Lady*, Induction, 1.27). The Boy hopes that they have come to discuss the 'state of the Stage' (*The Magnetic Lady*, Induction, 1.23); the pun is surely a double one, referring both to the state in which they find the theatre and the theatrical medium, and the theatre itself as a symbol for state affairs. Significantly enough, the Boy goes on to ask them 'which side of the people' they represent and Probee and Damplay assure him that they come from its upper echelons, that is to say that they are gentlemen. This republic of the audience is then a highly oligarchical affair

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<sup>40</sup> See Cust, *The Forced Loan*.

but nevertheless one that aspires to represent the people, if not the ‘faeces or grounds [groundlings]’ exactly. The House of Commons maintained similar aspirations and it is to that particular stage that we now return.

When the Host of *The New Inn* complains about his ‘*magna charta*’ in the inn not being upheld by Lovel, he is articulating not simply the straightforward language of inheritance and right but also that of parliamentary complaint. Lovel is somewhat peevish in reply, although he denies that he aims to offend in any way against the Host’s civil liberties:

Not to defraud you of your rights, or trench  
Upo’ your privileges or great charter,  
(For those are every ostler’s language now)  
Say, you were born beneath those smiling stars  
Have made you lord and owner of the Heart,  
Of the Light Heart in Barnet; suffer us  
Who are more saturnine t’ enjoy the shade  
Of your round roof yet.  
(I.ii.34-41)

Lovel again subtly compares the inn to a theatre with mention of its round roof, an important architectural feature of the Globe, attention to which is drawn in *Hamlet* (interestingly, another play concerned with themes of melancholy). He apparently resents the fact that the language of official complaint is now spoken by those of all ranks, even inn ostlers (the ostler of this inn, Peck, is part of the aforementioned citizen militia established by Tipto); this is again a mark of his class-ridden consciousness. In saying this

Lovel is unaware that Goodstock is indeed a lord and not simply of ‘The Light Heart’.

In *The New Inn*, interestingly enough, it is the self-appointed leader of the “militia” Glorious Tipto who also voices the language of royal prerogative and right.<sup>41</sup> He apparently assumes that as a knight or aristocrat, however debauched, he will be the “favourite” of Queen Pru (the role Buckingham held in relation to Charles); he therefore nominates Fly for an important position in her court. When she denies him this he demands his ‘petition of right’: he is of course completely forgetting his duties to Lady Frances and underestimating Pru’s new-found authority. She quickly instructs the over-attentive Beaufort in her hands-off approach to monarchy (despite the Host’s mocking interjections):

PRUDENCE	Sweet my lord. hand off:
	It is not now as when plain Prudence lived
	And reached her ladyship -
HOST	The chamber-pot.
PRUDENCE	The looking-glass, mine host; lose your house metaphor!
	You have a negligent memory indeed;
	Speak the host’s language!
	(II.vi.3-8)

It is the Host who insists on presenting “his” Fly to the ‘Queen’; Tipto is furious that he thus seeks to share in his glories:

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<sup>41</sup> Jonson’s gypsies in his 1621 masque, *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, describe their community both in terms of a civil militia and as governed by a ‘Magna Carta’ (ll.229-42). The masque has been read alternately as supportive and subversive of monarchy. The gypsies’ community provides an alternative realm in which to examine questions of rights and liberties as in Brome’s *A Jovial Crew*.



Ostlers to usurp  
 Upon my Sparta or province, as they say?  
 No broom but mine! . . .  
 I ask my rights and privileges;  
 And though for form I please to call't a suit,  
 I have not been accustomed to repulse.  
 (II.vi.43-45, 48-50)

Just as this is a “New Inn” so this is a new society where Tipto must grow accustomed to repulses of this nature, unless he be prepared to change and listen to the opinion of the court. Surely an implicit warning is present here, a warning issued to a monarch about to resume a parliament anxious to express its complaints and grievances and to be heard (the Petition of Right having been presented in the parliamentary session of the previous year, 1628). Tragically Charles chose not to heed such warnings, enacting the opposite approach and silencing parliament for eleven years in an act of pomposity comparable to Tipto’s indignance here: Prudence is by contrast, as her name suggests, a conciliatory sovereign.

This is not to suggest that *The New Inn* is somehow Jonson’s Magna Carta, his direct instruction to the king as to how he should conduct himself in the new parliament; it is however engaging with the thoughts and hopes of the time. In that respect, *The New Inn* is an eminently optimistic text, counselling Charles and the country in the potential and possibility of the new assembly, in the same way perhaps that *Sejanus* had in 1603 sought to make creative suggestions to the incoming monarch, James VI of

Scotland, as to how he might govern the new realm of England.

1629 was not a time when the road to civil war was even visible on the horizon but it was an age in which people sought to redefine the monarch's relationship with his subjects, contractual or otherwise, via ancient precedents such as Magna Carta. That was the reasoning behind parliament's refusal to grant Charles the customary revenue from tonnage and poundage for life, but rather only annually: in order to stress that new laws and taxation were to be dependent in the future upon parliamentary consent, and by extension the approval of the entire political community.<sup>42</sup>

When Prudence first enters in her queenly attire, the Host remarks: 'First minute of her reign! What will she do / Forty years hence, God bless her!' (II.vi.10-11); this does recall Elizabeth I who ruled for forty-seven years. But the play and the Host essentially look backward in the act of looking forwards: like those invocations of Magna Carta, they indulge in a very politicized form of nostalgia, still at this stage with a large degree

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<sup>42</sup> Jonson's Epigram # 64: 'To Our Great and Good K[ing] Charles on His Anniversary Day, 1629' does appear to lay the blame for the failure of the 1629 Parliament at the feet of the King's subjects:

O times! O manners! surfeit bred of ease,  
The truly epidemical disease!  
'Tis not alone the merchant, but the clown  
Is bankrupt turned; the cassock, cloak, and gown  
Are lost upon account! and none will know  
How much to heaven for thee, great Charles they owe!

(II.17-22)

but the political leanings of the epigrams are rarely so simple or clear-cut, as Michael McCaules has shown in *Jonsonian Discriminations*.

of hope. Perhaps this sense of optimism is why Jonson's later plays are felt by critics such as Barton and Butler to be so supportive of the monarchy: because they are not outright condemnations. Yet hostility is a prevalent mood in these later texts of Jonson's as we have seen in preceding chapters. The late 1620s and even the early 1630s were a time that felt capable of change and adaptation, but they were also a time that felt in need of change, possibly constitutional, certainly in terms of reverence for the ancient constitution and the rights of the subject as expressed therein. To regard Jonson's plays of that era as mere iterations of the dominant ideologies is a reductive reading. As Margot Heinemann has stated, in a prerevolutionary period such as this there is no single dominant ideology: 'that is one reason why it is a prerevolutionary situation.'<sup>43</sup>

*The New Inn* engages with residual, dominant, and emergent philosophies within the confines of its playtext. This is best exemplified, as ever, by direct quotation; when Lady Frances questions Pru's order that she should kiss Lovel, Pru stresses that Frances herself invested the power in her chambermaid to command thus:

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<sup>43</sup> Margot Heinemann, ' "God Help the Poor: The Rich Can Shift": The World Upside-Down and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre', in McMullan and Hope, pp. 151-65 (p. 151).

PRUDENCE	The royal assent is past, and cannot alter.
LADY FRANCES	You'll turn a tyrant.
PRUDENCE	Be you not a rebel,
	It is a name alike-odious.
LADY FRANCES	You'll hear me?
PRUDENCE	No, not o'this argument.
	Would you make laws, and be the first that break 'em?
	The example is pernicious in a subject,
	And of your quality, most.
	(II.vi.125-31)

This recognizes, naturally enough, the final say of the monarch but also stresses the importance of oaths and promises; Charles I in his dealings with parliament was answerable to a number of such promises, not least in respect to those laws and extraordinary measures that required parliamentary assent. Pru may emphasize royal prerogative but she also concedes its accountability on certain conditional matters. In this instance she is responding to the exact duties prescribed by the same Lady Frances who now seeks to redefine them at will:

PRUDENCE	Sovereigns use not
	To ask their subjects' suffrage where 'tis due,
	But where conditional.
HOST	A royal sovereign!
LATIMER	And a rare stateswoman. I admire her bearing
	In her new regiment.
	(II.vi.249-53)

The hope in 1629 must have been that Charles I would also bear himself well in his new regiment. This did not prove to be the case; the parliament that had raised such high hopes of rapprochement and reconciliation ended in prorogation and dissolution, like the dinner party at Lady Loadstone's in *The Magnetic Lady*, which was only ever just held in check. In the

Court of Love in *The New Inn* which ends, for Lovel, like a play ending, amidst a genuine feeling of loss and despair, the soon-to-be dissolved parliament of 1629 was uncannily prefigured just days before it opened. In the same play the closing chapter of Ben Jonson's court career was also sounded: the revels were indeed now ending.

CHAPTER TWELVE: CONCLUSION: THE END OF (T)HIS  
COMMONWEALTH DOES NOT FORGET THE BEGINNING

Ben Jonson was not a republican but he was fiercely involved in a debate over community and communal rights. By now it will be clear the ways in which notions of republicanism in the Jonsonian text shade very obviously into notions of community and the communal. Perhaps “communities” would be a more accurate term since Jonson - specifically in his generic variety (poetry, prose, criticism, drama, and masques) - celebrates the vast potential of literature for the production of a multiplicity of meanings.

In his interest in, and encouragement of, the participation of audiences in the co-creations of meaning, Jonson demonstrated a vested interest in the theatrical medium. His was evidently not a ‘community of the same’:<sup>1</sup> his writing constituted a recognition of communities of difference and even of the role of difference and disparity within ostensibly single and homogenized communities.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is Stanley Fish’s, see ‘Author-Readers’. Richard Helgerson has recently claimed for Jonson a ‘double sense of community’, classical, and contemporary and aristocratic, see ‘Ben Jonson’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 148-70. In doing so Helgerson effectively agrees with Fish, suggesting that Jonson wrote for a select coterie audience and in publishing his 1616 Folio demonstrated a resistance to the emergent print culture. I have specifically argued against this notion in Chapter Ten.

*A Tale of a Tub* has regularly been presented as a play which contrasts and defends the idealized rural community against the interference and interventions of central authority but this is not entirely accurate. The interference and over-dependence of central authority, and in particular the Personal Rule and non-parliamentary government of the monarch in the 1630s, upon local communities of this kind is stressed in the play but the communities of Tottenham Court and Finsbury Park are scarcely homogenized (or harmonized).<sup>2</sup> Internal differences and factions are the order of the day, even though it is St. Valentine's Day in the play. Perhaps in that respect the cotes of clowns are not so different from the courts of kings.

If at times the claims of this thesis seem a little dispersed, citing sameness and difference, absolutism and republicanism, individual and communal, this is because it is exactly the dispersal Jonson intends in his texts: the dispersal and displacement of comfortable or fixed notions of "republic" or "community". The strength of any community, as he recognized, is very broadly proportionate to the resistance to it. The seeming disparity of Jonson's canon and his life - with its public theatre productions and their potentiality for subversion, juxtaposed with court-

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Butler has also made this point in 'Stuart Politics' and 'Late Jonson'.

sponsored, supposedly orthodox texts and actions - is also I believe a quite self-conscious strategy. Jonson was himself never wholly of one community and often operated on the margins of a number of them.

The structure of this thesis as a whole exemplifies that belief in Jonson's investment in themes of communality. From marking out specific republican settings in plays such as *Volpone* and the Quarto version of *Every Man In*, and the employment of republican discourse in *The Alchemist*, through to the consideration of the paradoxes of Augustan rule in Rome in *Poetaster* (and that play's concurrent interest in the role of writers in republics and monarchies, limited or otherwise), there has been a continued focus on the communities of the plays concerned and related questions of the rights of individuals or institutions, of democracy, rank, and hierarchy - political, sexual, social, or otherwise. From this, more philosophical questions of republicanism and community have arisen. In the complex negotiations of the day at Bartholomew Fair, in the eponymous play, we see the operations and breakdowns of various notions of community, contract, and authority. That is the essence indeed of the 'republic in the fair'.

I have resisted the more usual chronological and evolutionary reading of Jonsonian drama in order to resist a linear



or developmental interpretation, since I wish to stress the need to consider Jonson's individual texts and actions within the highly localized and specific context of their own political moment(s), and not necessarily as part of some larger evolutionary or coherent movement. The duration of such "moments" is itself a highly subjective and locally-specific issue. Jonson's texts may not necessarily be seen as part of any general movement towards what has come to be known as the 'English Civil War' and yet specific issues that were of portent in the conflicts that come under that general heading can be traced in individual Jonsonian play-texts.

My argument pivots on an understanding of both the timeless and timely qualities of Jonson's work. There is little doubt that many of his theatrical techniques in the later plays such as *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Staple of News* were conscious reworkings of earlier uses of similar strategies; these were often themselves redeployments of theatrical convention. The onstage audience of *Every Man Out* becomes that of the female gossips in *The Staple of News* nearly thirty years later but arguably the technique is re-employed in more salient fashion to comment on the political "moment" of 1626. Any greater saliency in these later texts is a product I would argue less of Jonson's maturation as a writer (intelligent deployment of theatrical tradition is as

true of *Cynthia's Revels* as it is of *The New Inn*) than the nature of their differing political context(s). An onstage audience in the late 1620s and early 1630s provided a means of commentary upon a monarchy increasingly disinterested in public and parliamentary comment and opinion. The late texts are a precise example of the way in which traditional and familiar techniques provide something integral to and subversive of their political moment in Jonson drama. This paradoxical and potent blend of the timeless and the timely is crucial to an understanding of the Jonsonian canon in its full complexity.

Jonson is persistently described as “paradoxical”, “ambivalent”, and “ambiguous”, even as “neurotic” or “schizophrenic”.<sup>3</sup> His personal political and religious fluctuations are perhaps paradigmatic of an early seventeenth-century fluidity of thought and politics.<sup>4</sup> I have rehearsed elsewhere my oppositions on a number of levels to the movement known as “historical revisionism”: traditional scholars in an effort to retrieve seventeenth-century historical studies from a left-wing emphasis have been so biased in their recuperation of monarchy and in

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<sup>3</sup> See Burt, *Licensed by Authority*, and Arthur F. Marotti, ‘All About Jonson’s Poetry’, *ELH*, 39 (1972), 208-37.

<sup>4</sup> See similar suggestions of fluidity in David Norbrook’s account of Thomas May in his ‘Lucan, Thomas May, and the Creation of a Republican Literary Culture’, in Sharpe and Lake, pp. 45-66.

particular the “Personal Rule” of the 1630s that they have restricted much Jonsonian criticism to orthodox interpretations:<sup>5</sup> that is to say, reducing them to straightforward and unnuanced endorsements of monarchy. I am therefore anxious to avoid any over-determined notion of “Jonson the republican” being argued simply in counter-reaction to more orthodox interpretations of “Jonson the monarchist”. The fluidity of the man and of the plays themselves within their own respective and occasionally overlapping moments is instead emphasized.

That said there is a clear line traced within the thesis towards an increased emphasis upon notions of community as opposed to strict republicanism in Jonson’s work during the Caroline era. This is seen to occur not solely as a result of personal and professional rejection in this period but as a culmination of Jonson’s long-term ruminations on such themes, given particular focus by the political events of that time. In that respect the later plays have of necessity grouped themselves towards the end of the thesis as the consideration of

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sharpe, *The Personal Rule*; Russell, *Origins of the English Civil War*; and for a counter-reaction, Cust and Hughes. The revisionist manifesto of retrieving seventeenth-century historical study from a damaging over-concentration on parliament has never really been fulfilled but has led to selective interpretation of parliamentary proceedings in its resistance of the notion of gradual move towards civil war. Jonson’s careful reworking of the political debates of his times into his drama suggests a wholly more subtle approach than that of an either/or decision and his response to *Personal Rule* was wholly more complex than the rosy hue awarded the same period in Sharpe’s lengthy account.

republicanism breaks down into ideas of community and commonwealth. Earlier interest in ideas of the social contract assume a distinctly parliamentary form in these texts. Theatre is seen as an obvious analogue not only of the social community but of the parliamentary forum itself: a “House of Commons” indeed. The paradox of a social contract’s implication of reciprocal agreement and yet its suggestion of a determinate and limited community of meaning was explored in both the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* and the play proper. That play exposed the theatrical dichotomy of the veritable autonomy of the paying individual spectator (an autonomy often determined by the amount paid - scarcely an egalitarian or democratic ethos) and the potentially contagious effect of the group or audience (society is seen to have a similarly contagious effect upon Bartholomew Cokes in the play).

Similar ideas are applied to wider communities from *The Devil is an Ass* onwards. In stressing these plays in particular I also hope to reassess literary criticism’s concentration upon the Jonsonian Folio of 1616 and its tendency to regard plays after that date as signs of an author in decline.<sup>6</sup> For as I hope to have demonstrated these plays, as much as any that precurse them,

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Butler is an obvious exception here and I readily acknowledge the influence of his own research upon mine.

reveal the indeterminacies of Jonson's relation to literary and political authority.

My account of Jonson's "republicanism" is intended to bring into view and vex the very notion of contractual meaning and even the notion of community. Nowhere more so does this take place, ironically enough, than in Jonson's last and incomplete work, *The Sad Shepherd* (1637) which is a fascinating embodiment of his interest in communities. Its unusual setting (for Jonson) in Sherwood Forest and on the banks of the Trent, and its English pastoral theme of Robin Hood and his merry men amongst the greensward has often been remarked upon as a significant departure for the author.<sup>7</sup> He himself marks this supposed departure out in his prologue to the play:

*He that hath feasted you these forty yeares, . . .  
He pray's you would vouchsafe, for your owne sake,  
To heare him this once more, but, sit awake.  
And though hee now present you with such wooll,  
As from meere English Flocks his Muse can pull,  
He hopes when it is made up into Cloath;  
Not the most curious head here will be loath  
To weare a Hood of it; it being a Fleece.  
To match, or those of Sicily, or Greece.  
His Scene is Sherwood:*

(*The Sad Shepherd*, Prologue, ll.1, 7-15)

As ever, I think Jonson's Prologue has ambivalent purposes since pastoral, local, English, and communal themes have all shown themselves previously in his texts, be it in *The Alchemist*, or *Every Man In(F)*, or *Bartholomew Fair*, or *The Devil is an Ass*.

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<sup>7</sup> See Hayes, *Birth of Popular Culture*.

Pastoral features most obviously perhaps in *A Tale of a Tub* but as I hope to have demonstrated the themes and politics of that genre were not a late innovation in Jonson's canon.

*The Sad Shepherd* with its magical and pastoral themes is an interesting glimpse of what work Jonson may have gone on to write, although this game of speculation is always a dangerous one. In fact the play rehearses familiar themes from the preceding canon - in particular of festivity and community, and its disruption by often alien or foreign sources. There is a double comparison here with *Every Man Out* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Admittedly in both these plays the outsiders, while being self-proclaimed, are not obviously scapegoated: they merely appeal to an authority outside the social-exchange network of the plays concerned (unless we wish to regard Bartholomew Cokes's treatment as a comic variation on the scapegoating theme). In terms of scapegoating, Maudlin and her family are an interesting case. Anti-communal as her name suggests, Maudlin is anxious to disturb the merrymaking and festivity of Robin Hood, his merry men, and the local shepherds, and in particular to create irrevocable tension in the relationship between Robin and Marian. In doing so she is akin to 'the sower sort / Of Shepherds.' (*The Sad Shepherd*, I.iv.18-19) spoken of by those shepherds Robin welcomes to the feast, and therefore to the spirit of puritanism, so

often depicted as a hostile and invading force in the communities of Jonson's plays (*The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*).<sup>8</sup> Yet her treatment by Robin's community is seen as inextricably bound up with her gender and her age and therefore potentially as a venting of their internal tensions on outsiders. Helen Ostovich has remarked on the markedly female derivation of Maudlin's magical powers - transmitted to her via a girdle embroidered by her mother.<sup>9</sup> Female power is imaged in the embroidery and in the alternative phallus of the needle and therefore Ostovich claims 'The belt itself is both a sign and a product of sexual sovereignty.'<sup>10</sup> From this she deduces that Jonson demonstrates misogyny in the majority of his late texts (she makes *The New Inn* her exception to the rule). I would argue however that the misogyny explored in *The Sad Shepherd* and elsewhere in the Jonsonian canon is that of the relevant play-communities and not necessarily of Jonson himself (see Chapter Four).

Undoubtedly Maudlin's witchcraft and responses to it raise disturbing questions about the operations of community on the level of gender but her difference is marked out in a number of

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, makes just this case for the play.

<sup>9</sup> See Ostovich, 'The Appropriation of Pleasure'.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

respects, not least her slightly foreign or alien dialect and her ability to shift shapes. She is a powerful figure of female agency but what is extant of Act III indicates that much of her potency derives from the masculine spirit Puck-Hairy. Nor is she the only strong female figure in the play, so simple accusations levelled against Jonson's "misogyny" are also inadequate: Maid Marian, with her killing of the deer and her witty and humorous deflation of Amie's romantic swooning, is, as I have mentioned (see Chapter Eleven), a positive female emblem in the Jonsonian canon and in that an antecedent of Frances Fitzdotterel, Prudence, and even Dol Common. Simple scapegoating of the female is not the issue here although Jonson recognizes the part it has to play in the superstitions attaching themselves to witchcraft and, interestingly enough, to love. The accusations that so rapidly splinter the Nottingham community's surface harmony are levelled against the women of the group - Marian and the lost Earine - and indicate the bonding of the male society under pressures of this nature. Maudlin knows how she can hit hardest - via the appetite for women and venison. The deer and the women of this play are hunted on an equal basis: this was a familiar conceit of early modern poetry which Jonson exploits to full effect.

Group misogyny clearly has its part to play in notions of witchcraft: yet Jonson carries this consideration a stage further.



By depicting in detail the gusto with which Robin's men pursue the "hag" - Little John declares, 'Rare sport I sweare! this hunting of the Witch / Will make us' (*The Sad Shepherd* II.viii.1-2) - and their stereotypical notion of a witch and how she lives (in stark contrast to the common family feuding we have witnessed between Maudlin, Douce, and Lorell) he reveals society's scapegoating of the strange, the other. The men obsessively recount Maudlin's deformed appearance but George-a-Greene quietly records:

I thought a Witches bankes  
Had inclos'd nothing, but the merrie pranks  
Of some old woman.  
(*The Sad Shepherd*, II.viii.36-38)

By using the adjective "merry", more readily associated with the Sherwood community, George elides the difference between Maudlin and them, and with remarkable insight, for which we must also credit Jonson, recognizes the sexism and ageism that produced so many of the violent and virulent witch-hunts of the age. That the women mostly pursued in this way were simply old and a little eccentric, if not arthritic, evidences society's need to harmonize itself in opposition to an Other. All of this is also evidence of Jonson's depth of understanding of the operations and potential violations of any community, rural or urban. *The Sad Shepherd* is not therefore a radical late departure in the canon whether in terms of an interest in misogyny or scapegoating

although its specific operations in the play-text are unique. In investigating the breakdown of this particular alternative community Jonson is pursuing a line of analysis we have mapped out elsewhere in his drama. That in 1637 he was writing about English vagabond and outlaw communities like a number of other playwrights (Richard Brome in *A Jovial Crew* and James Shirley in *The Sisters*<sup>11</sup>) is simply further evidence of the need to view his plays within the context of their individual socio-political “moment” as well as part of a wider analysis.

Perhaps the detailed depictions of alternative societies and communities in Jonson’s plays offered an implicit critique of any monarch who failed to recognize and account for such differences within the nation.<sup>12</sup> The harmonizing themes and effects of the masque were exposed as elaborate fantasies in the day-to-day business of policy-making and in truth Jonson had even disrupted that particular generic form by means of the creation of the invading anti-masques; the antimasque invariably constituted signs of difference in the supposedly orthodox spectacle and was

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<sup>11</sup> See Rosemary Gaby, ‘Of Vagabonds and Commonwealths: *Beggars’ Bush*, *A Jovial Crew*, and *The Sisters*’, *SEL*, 34 (1994), 401-24.

<sup>12</sup> Vagabond literature has conversely been seen as crypto-monarchist.

often representative of more subversive social elements. In this way Jonson self-consciously limited the absolutism of the masque and stretched its court-determined boundaries.

In expressing such views Jonson was frequently forced to resort to the cultural discourse and media of the dominant ideology; this may be felt to constitute a hypocritical act if he truly sought the recognition of alternative communities. In recognizing the orality of a culture such as that of Tottenham Court in *A Tale of a Tub* he necessarily imposed his own educated language upon the characters he created. His interest in jargon was both republicanizing and egalitarian, and yet also strangely colonialist and appropriating - such is the nature of the dramatist's art. The paradoxes persist.

The English Commonwealth was not founded until twelve years after Ben Jonson's death and was far from any political future the dramatist may have envisioned. "Community" and "republicanism" are words of great valency in contemporary late twentieth-century societies and there is, as ever, the danger of interpreting backwards from our own political discourse and ideologies in order to blur the boundaries between our own era and that of the early modern period, to seek comforting parallels as opposed to disjunctions and discontinuities, even to see in the early seventeenth century a precedent for the political upheavals

which followed. Yet terms such as “republic”, “common good”, “common weal”, and “commonwealth” do resonate in the Jonsonian text and in particular in his drama. Within that complex and provocative medium Jonson was able to stretch and strain the boundaries of expectation, theatrical and political. In doing so he was casting responsibility and a sense of personal and communal rights back on to his audiences, be they in the public theatre or court-derived. That is the most egalitarian and republican act of all: Ben Jonson was a republican in the sense that he registered the potential and difference of all theatrical and literary communities and used his skill as an author to dramatize and mobilize them.

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I have divided the bibliography into two sections: primary sources and secondary sources. The primary sources list only those texts by Ben Jonson, or by Ben Jonson and others. All other texts are included in the list of secondary sources. I have throughout followed the guidelines for thesis presentation as set out in the *MHRA Style Book*, 4th edn (Leeds: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1991).

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